Rewriting Writers Workshop: Creating Safe Spaces for Disruptive Stories

Mitzi Lewison
Lee Heffernan
Indiana University

This article explores a third-grade teacher's use of critical writing pedagogy to encourage students' exploration of issues that were important in their lives from personal as well as social perspectives. She used a particular version of critical writing pedagogy—social narrative writing—in which students read and discussed children's literature with social and political themes; shared notebook responses to these books; used fiction writing as a tool for constructing and analyzing problematic issues; used a wide range of cultural resources as the characters they created took on the identities, dilemmas, and obstacles of self and others; and participated in making this writers workshop a writing collective. We analyzed the texts of picture books produced by the 19 children in the class. We also examined the power relationships that dominated students' narratives—in this case, the focus was on bullying—and observed students using writing as a form of social action as they brought their grievances about school culture into the open. We conclude with a discussion of the problems and potential of critical writing pedagogy—specifically social narrative writing—on teaching, curriculum, and community in this third-grade classroom.

Crow Boy (Yashima, 1976) recounts the story of Chibi, a small boy who was teased by peers and ignored by teachers through five long years of elementary school. Yashima's themes of intolerance, teasing, and exclusion are common in the lives of youngsters today, this despite an expanded emphasis on the impor-
tance of children’s sense of belonging (Glasser, 1975; Glasser & Dotson, 1998), and a plethora of school programs that focus on civility, tolerance, and diversity (Newquist, 1997; Rigby, 2001). Third-grade students in Lee Heffernan’s classroom read and discussed *Crow Boy* and other texts with social and political themes and eventually wrote picture books (Heffernan & Lewison, 2003) as a means of broadcasting their own tales of injustice. We report in this article on a study of these students and this classroom. Specifically, we focus on how literacy in this classroom—that is, the reading and writing of texts related to issues of social justice, especially the issue of bullying—was a particularly promising avenue for addressing and negotiating such issues.

This project started seven years ago. Lee, a third-grade teacher and doctoral student, and Mitzi, a university professor, share a strong commitment to exploring critical literacy practices in elementary classrooms (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluijs, 2002). Like Harste and Leland (2000), we believe that “teachers who re-imagine teaching as a set of critical practices disrupt the normative patterns of society and open up spaces for new voices to be heard” (p. 6). With this vision, we worked together as co-researchers in Lee’s classroom. Lee had become increasingly frustrated with the personal narrative writing she received year after year from students in her writers workshop classroom (Calkins, 1986/1994; Graves, 1983): the dog stories, the kid-sister stories, the stories about the broken arm, the baseball game, the slumber party. As a result, Lee began to read books aloud to her students that focused on social and political issues such as racism, classism, and ageism (Heffernan, 2004; Heffernan & Lewison, 2000). In classroom conversations that emerged from these books, students demonstrated that they had knowledge of current events and issues of justice. They also were keenly curious about topics such as racism, poverty, and consumerism. The passionate conversations that erupted in reader’s workshop (Atwell, 1987) contrasted with the repetitious topics students wrote about during writers workshop. Though often well-crafted, the stories generally lacked passion and excitement. These recycled topics (Lensmire, 1994) led us to examine both traditional writers-workshop pedagogy and critical-writing pedagogies (Kamler, 2001; Lensmire, 1994; see also Heffernan & Lewison, 2003), and led Lee to create a version of critical writing pedagogy for which she developed a genre of writing that we characterize as “social narrative,” designed to help students “relocate” their personal stories so that they could analyze and critique their social worlds.

In this article, we describe the dynamics of the critical writing workshop in Lee’s classroom, exploring how children’s social narrative writing helped to foster their critical social development. Such writing acted as a tool to disrupt students’ naturalized ways of “doing writing” in elementary schools, encouraging them to analyze and critique issues they described as important in their lives. These students’ social narrative writing focused both teacher and student attention on the
nature of texts as collective constructions, as students wove together a number of sources—including the events in their lives, events in the lives of their classmates, and traces of texts and discussions that were part of the classroom curriculum. We argue that social narrative writing can help create safe classroom spaces where students publicly share issues of personal and social concern. That is, social narrative writing can provide a way for students to see literacy as a community resource, as a way to explore the power relationships that impact their lives, and as a tool for taking action in the world.

**Conceptual Framework**

**Critical Writing Pedagogy**

This study is informed by notions of both process and critical writing pedagogies. Process writing pedagogy emphasizes the importance of student creativity, expression, and ownership of text (Calkins, 1986/1994; Graves, 1983). Critical writing pedagogy uses the personal focus of the process approach, but also highlights the sociological implications of personal issues. In this framework, writing is perceived as a tool for interrogating personal lives within social contexts, as writers use texts to represent and interpret their everyday worlds (Christensen, 2000; Heffernan & Lewison, 2003; Kamler, 2001).

One key way that critical approaches differ from strict process approaches is in the concept of *voice*. In process-oriented writing instruction and workshops, student voice is generally conceived as the author’s inner “intentions, desires, dreams, and experiences” (Lensmire, 2000, p. 69), and is regarded as a stable, already-in-the-head representation of the self waiting to be revealed. Yet, as Ellsworth (1989) reminds us, voice is “partial, multiple, and contradictory” (p. 312). Further, as Kamler (2001) notes, “calls for students to publicly reveal or even confess information about their lives and cultures in the presence of others—including teachers—can be not only voyeuristic, but dangerous, a form of surveillance to see if students produce the right voice” (pp. 40-41). In order to address the conundrum of personal exploration in the context of social interpretation, in this study, we take up Kamler’s (2001) call for the use of the metaphor of *story* rather than voice, because metaphorically, “story allows a more textual orientation than voice, a closer attention to what is written” (p. 45), rather than to the person who has written it. “Stories are specific, rooted in particular cultural contexts, [and] don’t tell single truths” (Kamler, 2001, pp. 45-46). Taking up the concept of story over voice does not mean that we reject all aspects of process pedagogy. Kamler (2001) credits Lensmire (1998) with pointing out two important aspects of process pedagogy that our notion of critical pedagogy encompasses: “its commitment to taking students’ experiences and meanings seriously,” and its commitment to a pedagogy of engagement, which gives students agency to “pursue topics they find compelling and meaningful” (Kamler, 2001, p. 38).
Following Lensmire (2000), we also take issue with those advocates of critical pedagogy who "embed voice in politics and history writ large, rather than within the local values, meanings, and relations . . . of particular classrooms" (p. 70). Lensmire notes the risks to students when teachers or other students interrogate and question students' voices—a stance Ellsworth (1989) also takes up when she points out the dangers many students face when they step out of the "safety of silence" (p. 313) in classrooms where critical dialogue is the norm. Too often, the dynamics of student-to-student and student-to-teacher power relationships are not taken into account during interrogation-and-critique sessions.

We do, however, agree with advocates of critical approaches who emphasize the political nature of the writing act (Berlin, 1993; Kamler, 2001). In critical writing pedagogy, teachers extend the process approach by focusing on "justice as well as skills" (Christensen, 2000, p. 59). Critical writing pedagogy introduces students to a sense of intentionality or deliberation about what writing can do. Christensen uses "rising up" as a "metaphor for students imagining a different kind of society" through writing (p. viii). Because a greater sense of purpose or intentionality does not evolve naturally in student writers, critical writing pedagogy calls for a more activist role on the part of teachers, as they work to effect social change along with their students (Bomer and Bomer, 2002; Heffernan & Lewison, 2003; Kamler, 2001; Lensmire, 2000; Soo Hoo & Brown, 1994).

Lensmire (2000) reminds us that critical writing pedagogy highlights the powers and responsibilities of writing. In its emphasis on the connection between the personal and the political, critical writing pedagogy works to present writing as creative as well as transgressive, in that language and other sign systems are used to disrupt unfair or biased beliefs, having the potential to allow us to look at the world through new lenses (Lewison et al., 2002). In considering writing as both a personal and sociological endeavor, in switching the emphasis in student writing from voice to story, and in reconceptualizing writing as a way to get important work done in the world, critical writing pedagogy allowed the two of us to reimagine the teaching of writing in a way that increased our appreciation of the impact writing can have on readers.

**Intertextuality**

In addition to critical writing pedagogy, this study is informed by research and theory on intertextuality. In an investigation of children's disruptive stories (that is, writing that goes beyond traditional storylines), Yeoman (1999) examines how fourth- and fifth-grade students use intertextual knowledge to disrupt conventional gendered characters and plots in their stories. She defines intertextual knowledge as the "use of previously known texts to make sense of new ones and to give coherence to lived experience" (p. 427). Yeoman describes how children drew on their knowledge of gender stereotypes—a part of the classroom curriculum
achieved by critical analytic reading—to write narratives that countered traditional gendered storylines. Through these classroom experiences, the students built “sharable imaginative worlds” (p. 429).

In describing children’s development as writers, Dyson (2003) points out that “it is not the presence of singular bits of written language experiences that are developmentally critical . . . but the complex gestalt of children’s cultural resources” (p. 5). In using cultural resources, students appropriate the words, ideas, images, conventions, ideologies, and language of others (Dyson, 2003; Lensmire, 2000). These resources are not discrete, closed-off entities rooted in an ideology of individualism, originality, and creativity, but, rather, collective constructions (Chandler, 1994, p. 1). In conceptualizing texts as collective constructions, Keep, McLaughlin, and Parmar (1993-2001) draw on semiotic theory to make the case that “all literary production takes place in the presence of other texts” (p. 1), and that “writing is always an iteration . . . a re-writing which foregrounds the trace of the various texts it both knowingly and unknowingly places and displaces” (p. 1). They remind us that ideas and specific elements for writing do not magically emerge from individuals, but, rather, often come from other written texts. This concept echoes Bakhtin’s (1986) notion that “each utterance is tilted with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related” (p. 91).

These notions of intertextuality as an integral part of the composing process are illustrated in the classroom research of Lancia (1997), Freedman (1995), and Dyson (2003). Lancia conducted an investigation examining 417 second-graders’ stories and found that without their teachers’ prompting, young authors borrowed plots, characters, plot devices, elements of genre, or information from non-fiction sources in 57% of their completed stories. In a related study, Freedman (1995) noticed that her second- and third-graders were sharing titles, characters, and plots; but instead of borrowing from published texts, students in Freedman’s classroom borrowed from other students’ written stories. Class members took up writing “Mr. and Mrs. Stories” (“Mr. and Mrs. Taxproblem,” “Mr. and Mrs. Scaredy Cat,” and so on) after the initial characters and plots were developed by a group of three girls. By the end of the year, 15 out of 21 children in the class had written at least one Mr. and Mrs. Story. In a systematic examination of the students’ Mr. and Mrs. Stories, Freedman found the children’s borrowing went beyond the simple device of Mr. and Mrs. titles and characters; rather, the students were borrowing the concepts of elaborated lead sentences, beginning stories with quotes, incorporating lists, and interfacing characters and plot details from one story to another. Both Lancia’s and Freedman’s research illustrate how written texts (both published and child-authored) serve as powerful resources for student story writing. Dyson’s (2003) work further expands this concept of text-borrowing by focusing on students’ appropriations of popular culture in their writing and multimedia productions. Using the rap metaphor of “remixing” (p. 176) to describe how ut-
terances (oral, written, visual) are “redesigned” (rather than simply repeated), Dyson honors how children recontextualize and orchestrate a variety of resources to produce messages for social participation (p. 183).

The concepts of understanding texts as collective constructions, seeing student borrowing in writing as remixing rather than copying, and drawing upon students’ cultural resources as a regular part of the curriculum allowed us to understand the important role that intertextuality plays in student-authored stories. These understandings also strengthened our belief in envisioning writing as a collective endeavor.

**Power-Over Relationships and Bullying**

This study is also informed by the concept of power-over relationships. Described by a variety of authors across a number of disciplines, the most common conception of power-over is coercion—that is, controlling or imposing one’s will or desire on another person or group (Fairclough, 1989; Hartstock, 1983; Kreisberg, 1992; Lewison, 1999). Closely associated with coercion is the maintenance of top-down hierarchies, which are traditionally male-dominated (Davis, 1991; Foucault, 1977, as cited in Hindess, 1996; Kreisberg, 1992; Lewison, 1999). These power-over situations create barriers to communication and human empathy and isolate less powerful individuals (Follett, 1940; Kreisberg, 1992; Lewison, 1999; Starhawk, 1987). In addition to domination and top-down hierarchies, power may also be perceived as a quantity—that is, a hoarding of resources that are viewed as scarce commodities (Follett, 1940; Kreisberg, 1992; Lewison, 1999; Sheridan, Street, & Bloome, 2000; Starhawk, 1987). In this scheme, power is always understood to be a zero-sum proposition with winners and losers (Macy, 1983).

Because bullying was a particularly salient instantiation of power-over and unequal power relationships, we also draw upon relevant work on bullying to analyze data in this study. Bullying is typically defined as altercations among children or adults ranging from name-calling to instances of extreme emotional or physical violence. Pointing out that bullying involves “repeated and systematic harassment of others,” Sudermann, Jaffee, and Schieck (1996, p. 1) characterize bullying as encompassing physical violence or attacks, verbal taunts, name-calling, put-downs, threats, intimidation, exclusion from peer group, extortion or stealing of money or possessions, ethnically based verbal abuse, or gender-based put-downs. Many adults do not consider teasing and verbal taunts to be forms of bullying (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001), but verbal bullies use language to hurt, degrade, and torment, and verbal taunting is the most common method of bullying (Reed, 2004). In a review of literature on bullying, Reed (2004) reported on a study by Argenbright and Edgell (1999) that shows how verbal abuse “is the easiest [form of bullying] to impose and the most difficult to identify since
there is often no evidence and no physical scars are present” (p. 6). Verbal abuse also interferes with students’ ability to learn (Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005).

Sudermann, Jaffee, and Schieck (1996) have examined international studies that track the frequency of bullying in different parts of the world. In Norway, 9% of students are identified as victims of bullying (Olweus, 1993); in Toronto, occurrences involve between 12% and 15% of students (Pepler, Craig, Zeigler, & Charach, 1994); and in the United States, Newquist (1997) reports that between 10% to 15% of students are the targets of bullying. In more recent data, Nishina and Juvonen (2005) report that nearly half of the sixth graders they studied were bullied. Also, a survey of 3,400 high school students found that 65% of teens reported being verbally or physically harassed in the previous year (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005).

These numbers are disturbing when contrasted with studies that describe how teachers and principals often underestimate the amount of bullying that takes place in schools and how adults often do nothing about taunting when reported by students (Newquist, 1997; Rigby, 1995; Viadero, 1997). Viadero (1997) found that many teachers are reluctant to get involved in a bullying incident when they spot it. She describes how some adults hate bullying, yet see it as inevitable, and many feel powerless to do much about it. Viadero interviewed researcher Nan Stein, who observed that “kids say that when they tell the adults about the bullying, adults don’t take them seriously, or they make them feel responsible for going back and working it out” (Viadero, 1997, p. 24). This dismissal of bullying by adults is similar to a form of power-over labeled consent (Fairclough, 1989, p. 33). As existing power relationships are legitimatized, those with less power go along with the existing structures and relationships. It is advantageous for those in power to keep potentially problematic issues hidden and not open to examination (Fairclough, 1989; Follett, 1940; Komter, 1991; Lukes, 1974). In such a scenario, because bullying remains unacknowledged, it is neither scrutinized nor critiqued.

In most discussions of power-over, power is viewed as negative and coercive. To combat the negative influences of power, resistance is often seen as the traditional way to challenge domination, coercion, and consent (e.g., Fairclough, 1989, p. 20). Fairclough (1989) argues that in addition to resistance, open communication and public debate can be mechanisms of emancipation and a way for those with little power to struggle against domination.

Understanding the nuances of power-over relationships, especially around issues of bullying, helped us conduct a detailed analysis of student stories. Instead of viewing domination as one large category, we were able to distinguish verbal taunts, racism, sexism, exclusion, oppression, and violence—as well as instances of taking action, resistance, and inclusion. These distinctions are important, especially if we take up Ellsworth’s (1989) call to acknowledge the narratives of oppressed groups, in this case students who had experienced bullying. Likewise, un-
derstanding the role of intertextuality in writing allowed us to identify how traces of books discussed in class and events in students’ lives were appropriated, juxta-
posed, and orchestrated into complex new stories composed by young writers.

Finally, by shifting our focus in teaching writing from voice to story, we were able to document how students turned their lived experiences into texts that had the potential to get things done in the world. We were also able to explore social narrative writing as a genre which, in blurring real life and fiction, might allow students to safely construct stories about important issues in their lives. As Smith (2007) notes, “Stories are our way of making sense of the world. If we can’t make up a story about something we encounter or experience, we can’t make sense of it” (p. 32). Taken together, these analytic frames revealed the affordances and problems associated with social narrative writing, the types of narratives that students produced while working in this genre, and student perspectives on how oppression and domination played out in their school.

Method
We examined the child-authored books written during the first semester of the 1999-2000 school year by third-grade students in Lee’s class. The primary method of analysis was text analysis. We also drew on fieldnotes, students’ notebook entries, and student interviews.

Setting
The school site was a K-6 public elementary school of 450 students in a mid-sized Midwestern college town. Fewer than five percent of the students at this school qualified for the free-lunch program.

Participants
The participants in this study were 12 boys, 7 girls, and their teacher (Lee) in a third-grade classroom. Five of the students (all boys) received special education services. Two students were Asian Americans and the rest were of European ancestry. At the time of this study, Lee had taught school for seventeen years and was working toward a master’s degree. She was a member of the local Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) group, which included both teachers and professors at the local university. After attending seminars and study groups focused on critical literacy, she became especially interested in adapting Luke and Freebody’s (1997) sociological model of reading in order to expand her students’ literacy-learning opportunities.

Curriculum
The students read and discussed five children’s literature books before they wrote their own picture books. Harste, Breau, Leland, Lewison, Ocipeka, and Vasquez (2000) describe the type of children’s literature used in this study as social issues
books. They characterize the books as having storylines that make difference visible, give voice to those traditionally silenced, explore dominant systems of meaning in our society, question why certain groups are positioned as “others,” and show how ordinary people can begin to take action to help resolve important social issues. Yeoman (1999, p. 427) calls social issues books that specifically “disrupt conventional storylines about gender” disruptive stories. Although we find the term disruptive nicely descriptive of unconventional texts, gender is too narrow a category to depict the books used in this third-grade classroom; we therefore expanded Yeoman's definition to include constraining and limited conceptions of race, class, language, and power relationships in children's books.

Table 1 lists the texts that the students read and discussed in class prior to writing their own stories. The table also gives a short description of each text and themes identified by students.

### Table 1. Children's Literature Texts, Descriptions, and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Student-Identified Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crow Boy</td>
<td>The story of a small boy who was teased by peers and ignored by teachers through five long years of elementary school.</td>
<td>Accepting people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Yashima, 1976)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Accepting differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special talents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peasing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Caring about others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Explores how different languages can camouflage a common culture, how pop-cultures are often created to sell merchandise and define who is in and who is our, and how language and issues of multiculturalism are related to power in our society.</td>
<td>Friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Steptoe, 1997)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Why are clothes so important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>We're all from different backgrounds and races.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voices in the Park</td>
<td>Text and illustrations turn a story about a simple trip to the park into a multi-voiced tale that is rooted in issues of class, gender, unemployment, and economic stereotypes.</td>
<td>Money differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Browne, 1998)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Let kids play with kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Excluding people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Judging people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilma Unlimited: How Wilma</td>
<td>Recounts the story of how Rudolph overcomes partial paralysis from childhood polio to become an Olympic athlete.</td>
<td>Physical disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Wilma</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sexism/racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudolph Became the World's Fastest Woman</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desegregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Krull, 1996)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going Home</td>
<td>A family’s trip to Mexico for Christmas raises questions of economic disparity, the hard working conditions of farm laborers in the United States, the differences in language and culture that can exist within families, and the painful choices and sacrifices faced by many families living in poverty.</td>
<td>Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Bunting, 1996)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Money differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Secrets in families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Why make sacrifices for education?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classroom Procedures

Classroom procedures centered on Lee’s strategy to make connections explicit between students’ book conversations and writing. Students discussed five social issues books, and Lee had the students jot down ideas on sticky notes about a personal connection they had made to each. After reading Crow Boy (Yashima, 1976), for example, one student wrote, “The first day of school I wouldn’t eat because I had no one to play with me.” Another jotted down, “I am small.” Another wrote, “I can make crow calls.” Using these notes as resources for writing in their notebooks, students produced ten-minute quick-writes about their personal connection to the books, as in this example from Min’s notebook:

My Face

Once a while people make fun of my face. Just because it’s a little different. Like at recess [another student’s name] he said that my face looks like a dead raccoon face. When he said that it hurt my feelings. It is not nice to make fun of people’s face. Because how would you like to be called names? I bet that you wouldn’t.

Note how, in the notebook example above, we see Min’s recounting the common social practice of bullying based on physical appearance. This entry is at once both personal and social. The students went through the process of writing notebook entries in response to all of the texts listed in Table 1.

After a seven-week process of reading, discussing, and composing notebook responses to the texts, Lee taught a particular writing mini-lesson. In order to foster social writing that would entail critique, analysis, and interpretation of personal experience, Lee pointed to a display of the disruptive texts that students had been reading and asked, “Why do you think these authors wrote these books?” The children responded with statements such as: “Maybe he wanted us to think about how it feels to be left out,” and “Moving is hard.” After Lee and the students had talked about powerful writing, she suggested they try writing their own books that would encourage readers to think about important issues in the world. The students generated a list of the purposes and themes of the books read aloud (see Table 1). They then looked through their writer’s notebooks to find entries with important themes. The students selected pieces they thought could be woven together to make a picture book that would have an impact on readers. After storyboarding (drawing a story plan on sticky notes that can be moved around) and revising their drafts numerous times, the children published original fiction books, most of which explored school problems. The plot lines and characters they created included excerpts from the notebook entries they composed in response to the disruptive texts the class had read and discussed together.
**Data Sources**

Data sources included the 19 child-authored books, field notes from Mitzi’s classroom observations, Lee’s field notes, the entries from students’ writer’s notebooks, student interviews, and artifacts created by the class including charts and a learning wall (Vasquez, 2001). The learning wall was a place in the classroom for posting illustrations and quotes that represented class conversations about books and other texts.

**Data Analysis**

Although students created illustrations in their storybooks, in order to limit the scope of this paper, we only analyzed the text portions of the books. We examined these 19 child-authored social narrative texts iteratively, identifying sections of text that focused on social issues and power-over relationships. We began the process of analysis in close collaboration, together dividing three stories into idea units or clauses (Chafe, 1979; Gee, 1999) and then coding each relevant idea unit. For example, the following passage from a student’s text was divided into two idea units, each of which received a code:

> “Jenny glared at Fred [Bullying reaction: J. Shows anger at F’s bullying] as she said, *Listen, just because you are in fourth grade doesn’t mean you can push other kids around.*” [Protagonist agency: J takes action for C, a less assertive peer]

After we concurred on the coding of the first three stories, we independently coded the other sixteen. Subsequently, we compared our individual codings. When there were differences in coding, we discussed discrepancies and came to agreement.

After we analyzed all of the stories, we grouped our analytic codes into four broad categories: bullying actions, bullying reactions, the roles of adult characters, and protagonist agency (see Table 2). Later, we used these categories to organize our findings.

Finally, we created a table displaying the frequency of types of bullying in each child’s picture book, noting whether the text was written by a girl or a boy. Table 3 highlights the predominance of particular themes and representations of power in the students’ writing while reflecting boy-girl comparisons.

**Findings**

We present our analysis of the students’ picture books according to the categories in Table 2: (a) bullying actions, (b) bullying reactions, (c) the roles of adult characters, and (d) protagonist agency. For bullying actions, we also report the frequency of different types of incidents (as in Table 3).
Table 2. Framework and Codes for Analyzing Power Relationships in Student Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Categories</th>
<th>Examples from Students’ Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bullying Actions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RACE</td>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The same kids made fun of him because he was black.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEX</td>
<td>Sexism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys and girls can’t be friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Exclusion, isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get off our slide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X-I.</td>
<td>Exclusion because of language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When she got to school she couldn’t talk to anyone because she did not know the language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Physical trait as source of ridicule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hey shrimpy kid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OP</td>
<td>Oppressor (bullying, coercion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bob was walking home when the three bullies came and teased him again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They grabbed me by the feet and arms and threw me off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bullying Reactions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANG</td>
<td>Anger at lack of power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I got really mad. I stomped on the ground. I squeezed my hands into fists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW</td>
<td>Self-worth (who you are isn’t good enough)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lance kept collecting [Pokémon cards] . . . He suddenly became very popular at school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EM</td>
<td>Embarrassed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She saw a lunchbox with a spaceman on it. She saw a Superman coat. She tried to hide her [uncool] things in the coatroom, but it didn’t work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Spectator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We [the girls] stood by the goal, watching them play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Despair (lack of power)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He went home feeling very upset. He never wanted to go to school again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Awareness of being “the other”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She felt like she didn’t even exist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Fear, anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She was worried. She didn’t think she could learn in time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Crying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He just laid there and cried. He felt like a jerk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of Adult Characters</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>Parental pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I couldn’t believe how much Dad wanted me to fit in with the other kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Academic pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I was too nervous to eat. Because of the test. It counted one fourth of our grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADH</td>
<td>Adults don’t help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Parent responding to child’s distress:] You’ll like it here after a while. Things will get better for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD</td>
<td>Adult advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The principal came out and I told him what happened. “Come with me and let’s talk to them,” he said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Adult savior (rescuer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mom and I are going to talk with your teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF</td>
<td>Parent as friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Mom,” I said softly. “Can you help me?” My mom said, “Yes.” We snuggled up on the couch and talked.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Categories</th>
<th>Examples from Students’ Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BT</td>
<td>Bad teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pow-P</td>
<td>Parental power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pow-T</td>
<td>Teacher or principal power</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Protagonist Agency**

| A     | Taking action, initiative       | I walked away. |
|       |                                 | I had a plan.  |
| SP    | Saved by a more assertive peer  | A girl named Caitlin walked up and said, “You live near me. Do you want to play after school?” |
| DP    | Dependence on more powerful peer| Brian was trading Pokémon cards with some friends nearby. He saw what was happening. He dropped his cards and ran to help. |
| CONF  | Confidence, high self-efficacy  | He could take care of himself now. |
| R     | Resistance                      | Neal moved his desk away from the other kids, then started doodling instead of listening to his teacher. |
| INC   | Inclusion with peers            | At recess, they invited him to play soccer with them. |

Table 3. Frequency of Bullying Behaviors Represented in Child-Authored Picture Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Bullying</th>
<th>Frequency of incidents</th>
<th>Frequency of each by author’s gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys:</td>
<td>12 (63%)</td>
<td>Girls: 7 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Total: 19 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Abuse or Exclusion Based on Physical Appearance</td>
<td>4 (11%)</td>
<td>12 (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic or Race-Based Verbal Abuse or Exclusion</td>
<td>9 (26%)</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Violence, Attacks, or Threats</td>
<td>7 (20%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Taunts, Name-Calling</td>
<td>6 (17%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put-Downs Teasing or Exclusion Based on Lack of Ability at Sports</td>
<td>7 (20%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender-Based Put-Downs or Exclusion</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This response was coded as a gender-based put-down, but we also wanted to show that it could fit in another category. A girl wasn’t allowed to play soccer because “girls don’t know how to play soccer.”
Bullying Actions
Eleven out of twelve boys and six out of seven girls wrote about characters who were bullies, with a total of 56 different incidents of bullying in the 19 stories. In this classroom, 63% of the students were boys and 37% girls. The incidents of bullying written about in the picture books fell along similar gender lines: 62% of the occurrences were in boys' stories and 38% were in those written by girls. The following examples illustrate the bullying we encountered in the children's picture books.

Verbal Taunts or Exclusion Based on Physical Appearance
Hair color, facial features, and being short were all targets of teasing. Bullying based on physical appearance occurred 14 times in child-authored books—the most prevalent type of bullying represented in these stories. The following is an example from a picture book entitled Shorter Than Ever, written by one of the smallest children in the class:

At 10:00, we got on the bus for a field trip. Heather came up to me. She kept teasing me about my height.

At the ice skating rink, we stood in line for skates. Heather came up to me. "What size skates are you getting? Size one?" Everybody laughed except for Kelly and me. I felt like I wanted to go home.

When we returned from skating, it was time for lunch. I went to the lunchroom to sit with Kelly. Kelly and I were standing in the lunch line when I heard Heather at the table near us saying to everyone, "I bet she can't even reach high enough to get her food from the cart. I bet Kelly will have to help her get her food." Kelly and I were mad, but I just ignored her.

Girls portrayed verbal abuse or exclusion based on physical appearance in 57% of the bullying incidents they described, while boys did so in only 11%. The prominent role of physical appearance in the stories of these young females is striking, but it is important to note that four boys also wrote about bullies and physical appearance, thereby disrupting traditional male-female binaries (Blackburn, 2005).

Ethnic or Race-Based Verbal Abuse or Exclusion
We noted 13 race-based incidents of bullying—the second most prevalent type of bullying represented in student stories. Considering that there was not a lot of racial or ethnic diversity in this classroom, the number of stories with characters who were abused or excluded because of cultural background, language, or skin color was surprising. In this example, a European-American boy wrote about a mixed-race main character:

Brian and Tom became good friends. The other kids decided to be nicer to Tom be-
cause Brian liked him. In class they were working on a project about where they were from. Julie was from Florida. Rachel was from Chicago. Jon was from New York. Brian told everyone, “I was born in China. My father is from Indiana, but my mother is from China.” Several of the kids began to laugh. Brian felt embarrassed. He made up an excuse that he had to go to the bathroom. Drops of tears were shattering down. He felt so unhappy.

At recess, Brian walked up to Julie. “Do you want to play today?”

“I can’t Chinese Boy,” she answered and ran away.

Brian turned to Rachel. “Do you want to come over this afternoon, Rachel?”

“N. O. spells NO!” said Rachel.

Boys portrayed ethnic or race-based taunting or exclusion in 26% of their bullying incidents and girls in 19%. Even though only a couple of children were at the receiving end of this type of abuse, the class as a whole took up the injustices of a few, drawing upon classroom conversations about racism after two students shared their notebook entries describing racist name-calling on the playground. Of the 17 Caucasian students, five had main characters that were of a race or ethnic background different than their own.

The number of bullying occurrences in any particular category dropped significantly after we identified incidents based on physical appearance (16) and race (13). The next three categories in Table 3 stand out because most of the bullying was represented in boys’ stories.

**Physical Violence, Attacks, or Threats**

There were eight stories where students represented physical violence, attacks, or threats, with seven of these written by boys. The soccer field and the playground were recurring sites of all types of bullying in the students’ picture books. Gregory begins his book with an incident of intimidation that quickly turns to violence:

Elvis jumped off the slide. He wanted to go home. He couldn’t wait until the end of the day. His favorite part of school was 3:15 because that’s when school got out.

Elvis climbed back up the slide. A big, mean looking kid walked over to him. “Get off my slide,” he said.

“Your slide?” Elvis asked.

“Get off.”

“No.”

“You better.”

“No.”

The kid grabbed Elvis and pulled him down off the slide. Wham! Pow! He hit him hard. Then he laughed and walked away. Elvis had a bloody nose. He just laid there and sobbed. He felt like a jerk.

Physical violence was portrayed in 20% of the boys’ bullying incidents and in only 5% of those written by girls.
Verbal Taunts, Name-Calling, and Put-Downs
Although most taunting in students’ stories was tied to physical appearance, race, or ethnicity, we did find seven incidents of random name-calling or put-downs. The following is an example from Kyle:

My friend Ray kind of got annoying because he said things that got on people’s nerves. He said annoying things that weren’t true. He called people names like “weirdo.” I think he thought it was funny, but it really wasn’t. He was sometimes mean to people, too.
I told him not to do it, but he didn’t stop. I asked him again and again and again.

Verbal taunts and name-calling were portrayed in 17% of bullying incidents written by boys and in 5% written by girls.

Teasing or Exclusion Based on Lack of Ability in Sports
Bullying based on a perceived lack of athletic ability was portrayed seven times by boys and once by a girl. Andrew’s story, Getting Teased, is a typical example of how this type of bullying was represented:

One day I was playing soccer. I was goalie. I tried to kick the ball, but I missed. A few kids laughed at me. I got very mad.
Later, the ball was coming straight at me. I tried to kick it, but I missed the ball again.
“I hope this recess goes fast,” I thought to myself.
I began to play again. My face was rosy red because my shoe got caught in the net. I tried to rip the net, but it was no use. I got frustrated. I even almost got my other shoe caught in the net. I wished for the game to end.

The boys wrote about lack of ability in sports in 20% of bullying occurrences while this category appeared in 5% of the girls’ stories. Representations of violence, random name-calling, and bullying because of lack of ability in sports were highly represented by boys. These three categories account for 57% of boys’ bullying incidents and only 15% of girls’.

It is easy to interpret these data by asserting that boys are engaged in representing masculinity (behavior typically associated with men). But Blackburn (2005) provides an alternate lens for interpretation when she, like Butler (1999), invites us to trouble gender. This perspective allows us to focus on the three (out of seven) girls who represented performances of male-ness in their writing as they crossed traditional gender lines. By sharing these three stories with the class, we used student writing to disrupt “binary notions of gender” (Blackburn, 2005, p. 14) that are so ingrained in everyday culture that they are often invisible.

Gender-Based Put-Downs or Exclusions
Girls wrote about gender-based put-downs or exclusion in 14% of the bullying incidents in their stories, while boys represented them only 6% of the time. In the following example, we see gender-based exclusion occurring on the soccer field:
At recess we walked out together. We were standing there wondering what we should do, since we were all alone. Some kids were playing on the jungle gym. A lot of the boys were playing soccer. We stood by the goal and watched them play.

A girl from our class named Kelly walked up to one of the boys. "Can I play soccer?"

He said, "No. You're a girl. Girls don't know how to play soccer." He ran off to play. She stood there watching the boys.

Although only two boys took up gender-based put-downs or exclusion in their stories, this can be seen as another opportunity to trouble gender, as boys—even if it was only two—took up injustices related to gender. Now we move from incidents of bullying to incidents where characters react to bullying.

**Characters' Reactions to Bullying**

In conjunction with the representations of bullying that we found in the student stories, we also encountered strong reactions from characters to bullying actions, including anger over their lack of power, lack of self-worth, embarrassment, being a spectator, despair, awareness of being "the other," fear, and crying. Crying (especially by boys), became a category in our coding scheme that we had not anticipated, perhaps because of our implicit acceptance of mainstream cultural sanctions against boys crying. Boy main characters cried in seven out of the 12 stories written by boys (58%). In contrast, two girl main characters cried in the seven girls' stories (29%). Given that the boy's main characters were the ones that cried, and nowhere in the stories did other characters admonish these protagonists for crying, we believe the boys were using their characters' reactions to point out the strong emotional impact and despair that school bullying produces.

In Danny's picture book, the main character, Bob, cries twice. The following excerpt takes place on the playground. Bob had already cried earlier in the story because of being teased by boys on his way home from school:

That day Bob tried to join in at recess time. He wanted to play soccer, but they didn't let him play because he was different. He sat down by a tree crying. No one came by to help him.

A crying incident from Roy's story includes physical violence. It takes place at recess when the main boy character was playing on the slide, "minding my own business":

They got closer and closer and my heart was beating harder and harder as they got closer. They grabbed me by the feet and arms and threw me off. They ran off as I was trying not to cry but I couldn't help it.

The boys who represented their main characters crying resisted what Pollack (1999) calls the "Boy Code," which demands stoicism and silence. We believe that critical writing pedagogy, specifically social narrative writing, may have created a
safe space where third-grade boys could explore strong emotions without fear of ridicule or isolation by others. The open discussions of bullying and teasing in this classroom and being able to explore these issues in writing serve as one example of how teachers might work with students to create safe spaces for boys (Pollack, 2000). This aligns with Dutro’s call (2001/2002, as cited in Blackburn, 2005) for safe classroom spaces that can allow students to take gender risks.

In studying the story writing of second graders, McAuliffe (1994) noted the depiction of girls crying, but did not mention similar depictions of crying boys. McAuliffe relates an incident in a class discussion where the boys could not understand why a girl had created a main character who cried after flunking a test. When the third-grade students in Lee’s room read their picture books to classmates, the reaction to crying incidents in peers’ stories seemed to cross gender boundaries, in that both boys and girls were sympathetic to characters’ dilemmas regardless of the gender of the author.

**Representation of Adult Characters**

In analyzing representations of power, we coded a number of relevant depictions of adult characters (including parental pressure, academic pressure, adults don’t help, adult advocate, adult savior, parent as friend, bad teacher, parental power, and teacher or principal power). Adults were generally not portrayed as helpful resources for bullied characters. John’s story illustrates a common scenario. In the following excerpt, we enter the episode as a fight is breaking out on the soccer field after Lance’s team scores to win the game:

Soon Gary and Lance were fighting and soon they both were in the principal’s office. The principal lectured them about fighting. When they were allowed to go back to class, Lance started crying. He was still crying when he got to his classroom. He told his teacher how they had won and about the way Gary had teased him. The teacher said he could do nothing about it.

In only one picture book did a teacher character step in to help out a child who was being teased. Mostly, adults just weren’t around. In six stories, teacher characters actually knew about bullying problems, but remained mute or indifferent to them.

While parent characters behaved somewhat more supportively than teachers in the stories, parents were not consistently helpful when their children had problems at school. The following episode focuses on an immigrant from Africa named Bob, who is being teased relentlessly on his way home from school by three boys:

When he got home, Bob went to his room and cried. His mom came in and sat with him. Bob asked his mom, “Can we go back home to our old house? Kids keep teasing me.”
"Sorry son. We can't. Father and I already have jobs here."
"Why can't we?" said Bob. "Everybody hates me here."
"You'll like it here after a while. Things will get better for you."

The parent character's response that "things will get better" was common in students' picture books. Students wrote about how their characters were expected to wait out the abuse or exclusion they were experiencing, advice that was not very useful for the protagonists in these stories. Parents did sometimes help their children, however; in the story about Bob, for instance, his parents finally go to school and work out a way for him to "bring in some artifacts so that the kids can learn more about [him]."

The actions of adult characters represented by these third graders are corroborated by studies that report how teachers and principals underestimate the amount of bullying that takes place in schools and often do nothing about taunting when it is reported (Newquist, 1997; Rigby, 1995; Viadero, 1997). Henkin (2004) studied the "bully narratives" of middle-school youth and found these students writing repeatedly about what adults don't do in bullying incidents and what they ought to do. Students expressed their frustration with the lack of action on the part of adults.

Closely examining students' picture-book writing opened our eyes to the ways in which kids created adult characters who were mostly ineffective in helping the protagonists with bullying problems. Through social narrative writing, students were able to explore the issue of "unhelpful adults." These representations gave us pause, especially when one considers that the verbal abuse many students experience on a daily basis at school would result in termination of employment if it occurred in an adult workplace. As working professionals, we don't expect to be subjected to taunts and disrespect, yet it is a regular occurrence in the lives of many children. This genre offered students an opportunity to use writing as a tool to broadcast these issues to others.

**Protagonist Agency**

The girls created characters that were generally more powerful than the boys' characters in terms of assertiveness and getting what they wanted through talk and negotiation rather than aggression or coercion. Fifty-seven percent of the girls' stories (4 out of 7) and only 8% of the boys' (1 out of 12) had characters who attained power through confronting bullying head on. The characters created by these five children did not expect adults or friends to solve their problems. Their protagonists used both personal and social resources to triumph over oppressors. We provide two examples of the ways kids negotiated power: organizing against exclusion, and establishing power through discourse.
Organizing Against Exclusion

In Regina's story, Janet and other characters are excluded from playing soccer because of being "different" from the male athletes. Janet responds to this exclusion by starting a new kind of club. (This tactic supports Tannen's [1990] contention that girls are more likely to be concerned with connecting with others and with building social relationships.) Janet beats the oppressive system that operates at the school by forming a group that is equal in power to the soccer group at recess. We enter her story after she and another girl watch a classmate being excluded from soccer:

"Hey," I said, "Do you two want to start a different club? If you're different, you can join."

"Yeah, good idea," answered the girls.

For the next two weeks, I did everything with my new club. We thought it would just be a little game at first, but then every day more people joined us. Even if we wanted to, we couldn't stop our club. In fact, it wasn't ours anymore. It belonged to everybody. Cam joined because she was Vietnamese. John joined because he was English and he spoke with an accent. Kirby said that everyone made fun of him because he was bigger than the rest of us. We didn't think so. Several people who wore glasses joined. Even Greg joined. He wore braces and the sixth graders teased him.

At our meetings, we had to tell about our differences.

Establishing Power through Discourse

Two girls' female characters used assertive language to claim power. In Min's story, her character Patricia is upset because she is the target of race-based taunting by kids at school. After discussing the situation, her mom provides the typical adult response of "try to work it out," which, in this case, Patricia actually takes up. There are a number of instances during the story where Patricia confronts her tormenters. One example follows:

A fourth grader named Zack ran up to me. In front of everyone he yelled, "You're ugly, and your face looks like a dead raccoon's face. And your skin is too brown." When he said that, I burst into tears. I dropped to the ground. I was shocked about what he had said to me.

That afternoon, I talked to my mom again. She said, "Try to work it out."

I said, "Okay."

The next day I looked for Zack at recess. I saw him playing soccer. It was another hot day. At first I was scared. My legs started shaking. I was biting my nails as I stood there. My hair felt hot in the sun. I knew if I didn't want to be teased again, I would have to go up to Zack. Finally, I walked over and shouted angrily, "Why can't we be friends? What have I ever done to you?"

Zack was surprised. His eyes turned really bright. He could see I was really mad. Then he said, "I don't like being friends with girls."
“Zack, girls are exactly the same as boys. Being friends with girls is the same as being a friend with boys.”
“Yes, but you’re different.”
“Well, I’m the same as you. I have darker skin, that’s all.”
Zack was silent. “What do you say?” I asked him.
“Okay, I’ll try,” he said. We walked into school together.

In another story, Jane’s main character, Esther, also speaks out forcefully. After Esther confronts a classmate, insisting that girls can be friends with boys, Esther’s friend Lam compliments her forcefulness:

“Wow!” said Lam! You are very good at arguing, Esther. Usually those mean kids always win!”
“Well, not today,” said Esther.
After that, no one bothered Esther about being friends with Lam. Word got around that she was very good at “talk fighting.” You know, fighting with your mouth—arguing! Sam told everyone about it.

Here, talk fighting means not verbal abuse, but using words to take a stand. One might conclude that the fearless and secure girl characters who inhabit these stories are cause for celebration, especially if these female protagonists represent at least a part of their authors’ identities. But despite the strong young female voices in these stories, 57% of the bullying incidents that girls wrote about included verbal abuse or exclusion based on physical appearance. Are these eight- and nine-year-old girls already on the road to being drawn into the strong influence of magazine, television, and movie images of what an adolescent girl should look like, talk like, and act like? Pipher (1995) encourages adolescent girls to keep journals and write poetry and autobiography as a way to clarify and evaluate their experiences and feelings of confusion and insecurity. Social narrative writing might be an alternative or even more useful avenue for teens. In this genre, fictional stories can be shared publicly without the confessional aspect present in personal narratives or journal writing.

**Tensions and Complications**

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) point out that all writers of narrative research must be wary of unintentional falsehoods, such as the “Hollywood plot” in which everything works out well in the end. Social narrative writing did allow Lee’s students to explore and broadcast problems with school culture, but the work in this classroom was not unproblematic. For example, Lee struggled to figure out what stance to adopt when students resisted the social narrative genre. In the example below, Lee had to decide how she was going to handle an instance in which she and a student had different intentions. In the following excerpt from an earlier
publication (2004), she recounted an encounter with Andrew about choosing “big themes” rather than “topics” from his notebook to weave into a picture book story:

I could have quit while I was ahead, but I asked Andrew to share his theme. He looked at me and said matter-of-factly, “I’m going to write about the time I got stitches.” This was a small dilemma for me. I hesitated. I wondered about how forceful I wanted to be with this new focus on themes. The importance of choice as a condition of learning had been part of my conditioning as a teacher. At that moment, though, I felt that if I didn’t push all kids to choose themes over topics, the kids might bail out, retreating to the “record keeper” kind of writing of past workshops. I decided to press my point. “What theme will you be exploring in your story about getting stitches, Andrew?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to include your piece about kids being mean out on the soccer field to your stitches story?”

“No. That’s not how it happened.”

“I know. But remember that we’re trying to write books that really make people think about big ideas. So keep thinking about themes tonight when you’re at home, okay?”

Frances broke into our conversation: “I have an idea for Andrew. He could write about some of the violence that has been happening on the soccer field and that could lead to someone getting stitches and then they could figure out that they shouldn’t be so rough.”

This caused the class to erupt with more soccer field horror stories. Joshua yelled out, “I’m writing about soccer too!”

The soccer field was a key site for the social lives of these third graders. Frances and Joshua and others in the class had developed some awareness that their social experiences could be explored through writing topics. (Heffernan, 2004, p. 50)

As can be seen in the following excerpt, Andrew took Frances’ advice and wrote about soccer-field frustrations in his social narrative story:

When Brent laughed with some other players, I got really mad. I stomped on the ground. I squeezed my hands into fists. I started charging, but I stopped before I got to Brent. I realized that this was just a soccer game. I walked away. Then the whistle blew. I ran as fast as I could run. I was the second one in line. I wanted to get into the school so badly.

At home that afternoon, I told my mom about the soccer game. She told me that I couldn’t play soccer any more. I went to my room. “Thanks a lot, Brent. Now I can’t play soccer any more,” I screamed to no one. I took out some paper and drew a picture of Brent. I scribbled all over him.

This vignette illustrates Lee’s dilemma of whether to follow the process pedagogy she knew well, in which students control their writing (Calkins, 1986/1994; Graves, 1983), or whether to encourage students to write about larger social issues. As she made her moves with Andrew, Lee was keenly aware that there was a conflict
between his intentions (writing about a personal experience) and hers (having students focus on larger social themes). Lensmire (2000) argues that in both writers workshops and critical classrooms, conflict and risk are present in “relations between teachers and students . . . That complexities and conflict continue to trouble student and teacher communication even after the teacher rejects traditional practices and embraces alternative, progressive ones” (p. 70). We acknowledge that despite the successes we have experienced with social narrative writing, these are not achieved without conflict, struggle, and resistance.

Discussion

Echoes, Reverberations, and Intertextuality

When we have presented the data in this article at conference sessions, we have been regularly questioned and confronted with the assertion that the students were just mimicking the books read aloud in class. To determine if the students were simply retelling the stories they heard, we compared the themes of the children’s literature books that were read aloud with the themes of the child-authored books. We found that 41% of the bullying incidents that students wrote about (23 out of 56) contained intertextual traces of the books that were read aloud and discussed in class. In Crow Boy (Yashima, 1976). Chibi was teased because he was small, had trouble learning, and was different from the other students. Wilma, in Wilma Unlimited (Krull, 1996), was teased because of her leg brace. Hector, in Steptoe’s (1997) Creativity, was teased because he was wearing uncool clothing. We found echoes of professionally published teasing incidents when the third graders wrote about verbal taunts, name-calling, and verbal abuse or exclusion based on physical appearance.

But Dyson (2003) reminds us that children integrate and adapt other voices, and in this case, they were specifically appropriating content from the picture books Lee read to the class. In Dyson’s terms, these third graders were “borrowing, appropriating, juxtaposing, blending, remixing, and recontextualizing” (pp. 172-173) what they heard into new, not mimicked, texts. Applying the work of Bakhtin (1986), Lensmire (2000) views appropriation as the point where students “transform the utterances of others in the production of . . . [their] own speaking and writing” (p. 77). The students in Lee’s class used what the New London Group (1996, pp. 19-25) calls “available resources” as the “meanings” that they recomposed and transformed into a redesigned product—their picture book stories.

The students’ notebook entries describing connections to their own lives also became part of the intertextual web that the third graders used as resources in writing their fiction stories. The child-authored picture books were an interesting intertextual weave of fragments from the books read aloud in class, the life stories of peers recorded in notebook entries, and students’ individual life experiences.
Chandler’s (1994) concept of texts as collective constructions is clearly evident in this set of child-authored books. We can also see students using intertextual resources to give coherence and meaning to their lived experiences (Yeoman, 1999). Caughlan and Kelly (2004) see intertextuality as important to classroom dynamics:

One aspect of classroom discourse and practice that both indicates and contributes to coherence is intertextuality . . . If the borrowing or the allusion connects the literature to texts, characters, or themes encountered previously . . . then it functions as one of the mechanisms that enhance curricular coherence. In those cases where students as well as teachers contribute to this interweaving of textual references, the classroom is more dialogic as well.” (p. 28)

With this social narrative writing, where generative themes came from conversations and dialogue around text, students wrote and rewrote stories that carried traces of their lives, the lives of their classmates, and the lives of literary characters into compelling and disruptive narratives.

**Building a Writing Collective**

Lee fostered a classroom environment where students were engaged in a writing collective, where the norms of the collective were to write social narratives based on themes that were generated from dialogue related to the books Lee read aloud (Heffernan & Lewison, 2003). The notebook entries became resources as students developed these themes. In this process, the students were able to draw on the cultural resources of the class as a whole in composing their stories. Most seemed willing, if not eager, to have their characters take on the identities and problems of their peers. These students enthusiastically wrote about real-world topics that were important in their lives. Kamler’s (2001) work on critical writing pedagogy helps us to understand the power we noticed in social narrative writing. In her discussion of a writing workshop with older women, Kamler reflects:

An important component of the workshop was our focus on selection and representation, on the fact that the details a writer selects are a construct which gives greater power (vividness, engagement) to a narrative, but not necessarily the truth. One way we tried to interrupt the women’s practiced ways of telling about their experience as truth was to . . . write in the third person . . . the everyday, the ordinary can be crafted into an object which was not the truth, but which represents a moment, a set of positions. (pp. 68-72)

Similarly, the third graders in this study wrote in the third person about how their characters were positioned by others and how they positioned others. Drawing on cultural resources from inside and outside the classroom, students created hybrid texts that blurred real life and fiction, thus enabling them to safely construct powerful narratives about important issues in their lives. At the same time, the
Rewriting Writers Workshop

Lewison and Heffernan

students were learning about and experimenting with issues of race and gender, concerns not typically discussed in depth in primary classrooms. The world of the playground, unequal power relationships, and oppression became visible and were open to discussion, critique, and rewriting. These students wrote to “rise up” (Christensen, 2000), to call attention to injustices, and to try to make things different by broadcasting their messages to others.

Lensmire (2000) reminds us that in the social struggle to become through writing, “students cannot do it by themselves . . . Within the classroom they need teachers who recognize their struggles for voice, and help them transform these struggles into occasions for becoming” (p. 84). If Lee had left Andrew to write the easier “stitches” piece, there would have been no struggle, and, we believe, minimal growth for Andrew as a writer. Further explorations of the tensions as well as the pleasures of the teacher’s role within a critical writing pedagogy could be useful for teachers who choose to bring a more sociological stance to the writers workshop (Welch, 1997).

Writing as a Tool for Disrupting the Reproduction of Bullying

When we first invited students to make personal connections to disruptive children’s literature books, we noted the number of times that teasing, name-calling, and exclusion came up as personal topics in their notebook entries. These subjects were rarely talked about in class prior to this more sociological focus during reader’s and writers workshops. Early in the study, when a bi-racial child wrote about being called “Chinese Boy” and later brought up this taunting in a class discussion, Lee was shocked to learn, on further questioning, that this was not an isolated incident and that “it happens everyday.” Other students joined in and discussed how they had witnessed this race-based taunting at recess, but had not informed adults at the school or addressed it themselves. Reading and working with books like Crow Boy served as a springboard for discussing, interrogating, and writing about issues of harassment, domination, and injustice in students’ lives. Recognizing the importance of students’ own stories of oppression became just as important a resource for writing in this literacy classroom.

Ellsworth (1989) points out the importance of acknowledging the narratives of oppressed groups as valid. We did the same with this group of students. It was clear that these third graders understood playground bullying in a way that Lee could not. It took time before students started talking in class about issues that came up on the playground. Upon reflection, this “don’t tell” stance becomes perfectly understandable. Bullying and teasing on the playground are, after all, part of a larger cultural discourse. Children see demonstrations of bullying and teasing as a regular part of sitcoms, cartoons, and movies (Viadero, 1997). Further, many adults see bullying as inevitable, and children certainly pick up on this message. We’ve all heard the phrase, “Don’t be a tattletale,” a cultural adage that discourages
victimized children from seeking help. Finally, many students are ashamed of being victims and don’t want to call even more attention to themselves by bringing an adult into the situation. Telling on bullies can result in an increase in bullying behavior, especially since most adults either do not do anything when told about bullying or, in the case of teachers or principals, sometimes take privileges away for an entire class or group.

It is our belief that reading and writing fictional stories helped convince students that bullying was a legitimate topic for class discussions, which in turn prompted a series of changes in the classroom. For example, one student was being teased for being overweight at nearly every recess. This taunting finally became the topic of class meetings and eventually other students in the class protected this child on the playground. Bringing up this type of teasing in class meetings was potentially risky for this student. Since classrooms are not always safe places for students—especially students of color, the overweight, the physically different, and LGBT youth (Ellsworth, 1989; Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005)—we knew how important it was for the class to build high levels of trust and personal commitment to each other.

Conclusions

Fairclough (1989) discusses a struggle between what he terms “inculcation” and “communication.” He describes inculcation as the way domination is perceived as inevitable because it is hidden or naturalized; communication, on the other hand, serves as a “mechanism of emancipation” (p. 75), as naturalized inequities are rendered explicit in public debate. In social narrative writing—in this case about playground bullying—the children’s picture books served as public forums for making inculcated power relationships visible. We believe that life became more civil for students in this classroom as they interrogated who had power on the playground, how that power was maintained, how it could be contested, and how it could be changed. In interviews at the end of the year, the students spoke enthusiastically about the results of reading their picture books to other classes and how they hoped their books would make the school a better place to be. As educators, when we talk about writing for social justice, it is productive to not always think about writing for big transformations, but to delve into the local (Kamler, 2001). In this case, writing was grounded in the very specific and local contexts of students’ lives at a particular school.

If we truly believe in civil schools, then civility cannot be allowed to evaporate when children leave the security of their classrooms. School culture is much more than what happens within the classroom walls. In this study, we have attempted to meet Yeoman’s (1999) challenge of conducting research that examines “how to expand children’s narrative resources of race, class and gender through the cre-
lation and promotion of disruptive texts" (p. 439). Expanding narrative resources is not enough, however, if lessons learned in writing class do not influence the larger institutional structures of classrooms and schools.

Kamler (1993) argues that “issues of gender are for the most part invisible and naturalized in the elementary school classroom” (p. 95). She reminds us that the choices students make in writing topics are not innocent and that some teacher guidance is necessary to disrupt student reproduction of gender opposition and stereotypes in written texts. By reading disruptive texts and inviting students to discuss issues of race, class, language, and gender as part of their reader’s and writers workshops, these third graders were invited to safely make visible a variety of social ideologies about themselves and the other within the institution of their school. These students participated in a particular set of social practices with their teacher. Like other social practices, these particular practices “connect people with one another, and they include shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8). Lee and her students experienced such a move—that is, from understanding literacy as residing in individuals to literacy residing in groups. “In this way,” Barton and Hamilton maintain, “literacy becomes a community resource, realized in social relationships rather than a property of individuals” (p.13).

We continue to examine the potential of using social narrative writing as a way to create safe spaces in classrooms, spaces where, in Lensmire’s (2000) words, kids can struggle to become. It is our hope that we have presented a generative exemplar of a redesigned writers workshop that not only helped children produce quality writing, but also provided opportunities to examine important events in their lives. This study explored social narrative writing with one group of students in one school, and in working with subsequent classes, we have noted that the themes generated by students shift significantly from one year to the next. As the social narrative genre evolves, we continue to pay close attention to the influence that instructional stance has on classroom writing, to experiment with ways to redesign writers workshop, and to create and investigate spaces that make it possible for students to interrogate their complicated lives and the lives of others.

NOTES
1. These include Follett, 1940 (from business management); Kreisberg, 1992 and Henderson & Hawthorne, 1995 (from education); Macy, 1983 (from biological systems); and Starhawk, 1987 (from counseling/spirituality/political activism).
2. Students’ names are pseudonyms.
3. The character Brian had a lot of social capital because he had more Pokémon cards than anyone else in this story, and he gave some away to other kids.
CHILDREN’S BOOKS CITED


REFERENCES

 Dyson, A. H. (2003). Brothers and sisters learn to write: Popular literacies in childhood
and school cultures. New York: Teachers College Press.


Search for New Editor of English Education

The Conference on English Education is seeking a new editor for English Education. Persons interested in applying for the editorship should send a letter of application to be received no later than August 31, 2008. Letters should be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, one sample of published writing, a one-page statement of the applicant’s vision for the future of the journal, and two letters of general support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Please do not send books, monographs, or other materials that cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee.

Applicants are urged to consult with administrators on the question of time, resources, and other institutional support that may be required for the editorship of this journal. NCTE staff is available to provide advice and assistance; call or write Kurt Austin, Division Director for Publications at NCTE (217-328-3870, ext. 3619). The applicant appointed by the CEE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue to be published in October 2010. The appointment is for five years, nonrenewable. Applications should be sent to Kurt Austin, English Education Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096; kaustin@ncte.org.

Call for Candidates: Editor of Forum

The Conference on College Composition and Communication seeks applications and nominations for Editor of Forum: Newsletter for issues about part-time and contingent faculty. Forum is published twice a year (alternately in CCC and TETYC). The newsletter’s purpose is to publish articles, news, reviews and other items related to non-tenure-track faculty in college English or composition courses. This three-year position begins January 1, 2009.

Send a letter of application and CV by September 1, 2008, to Kristen Suchor, CCC Liaison, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096, or cccc@ncte.org.