Part I

Beginnings

This section provides an introduction to our project and an overview of theories and research in the areas of critical literacy education and teacher-led professional development (Chapter 1). We introduce you to the theoretical frames we are working in and against. For example, we share a framework for critical literacy/popular education that has been developed within educational contexts that are age level and context specific but show how we envision these models expanding to include learners across the lifespan. We move from a description of practices to attention to the role of learning for both individuals and groups. We reframe the practicing teacher as a learner and activist, a person who continues to become critically literate through experiences with participation across contexts. Here, we depart from the dichotomies that often characterize our talk about teaching and learning, in which one is either a teacher or student, oppressed or oppressor, novice or expert, and so on.

In Chapter 2 we present a case study of the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group that shares the history, timeline, and processes of the teacher-led professional development group. This chapter is structured around the dimensions of the critical literacy/popular education framework (building community, developing critical stances, critical inquiry and analysis and action, advocacy and social change) and also includes the “tools” as they apply to the group. We hear the voices of past and present LSJTRG participants as they come together to explore social justice education. This chapter sets the backdrop for the case study chapters that follow.

We invite you to join in thinking critically about where our experiences intersect and do not align with your own. As a group, we are constantly in this position of being faced with new ways of seeing literacy education, experiencing democratic practices, and generating new learning. We look forward to sharing our story with you.
1 Introduction

On the steps of the Old Courthouse in downtown St. Louis, Missouri, a crowd of people gathers at a rally in support of public education. The Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group (LSJTRG) and the ABC’s of Literacy Group\(^1\) have organized this rally to voice concerns about the privatization of education in St. Louis as it affects the rights of all people (locally and globally) for equal access to quality education. Across the street from the Old Courthouse a national conference of adult educators (Commission on Adult Basic Education) is taking place. We leaflet at the conference for attendees to join us at the rally, knowing that our struggle for education includes both K-12 and adult education.

We are here today to reaffirm the importance of education as a civil right—as the cornerstone of a strong democracy—not as an entitlement program or as a commodity in the market place. We are here today to call for a democratization of public education—not a privatization of public education.

Rebecca Rogers, co-founder of LSJTRG (with Mary Ann Kramer), opens the rally with comments that frame the importance of educators across the lifespan uniting around principles of democracy and civil rights. “The idea for this rally emerged out of a series of dialogues and actions around literacy education that have taken place in St. Louis. Educators across the lifespan have been working on realizing the connection between literacy and freedom.”

Ora Clark-Lewis, an adult education teacher and member of LSJTRG, makes the connection between the struggle for equal education today and 200 years ago when Freedom Schools were created in St. Louis in resistance to a state law forbidding enslaved African Americans to read and write.

Donna Jones, elected school board member, gives an update on the court case over the state take-over of the St. Louis Public Schools: “We are taking our case

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1. ABC’s of Literacy stands for Acting for a Better Community and includes a group of adult education teachers and educators who organize around literacy education for freedom. At different points, the paths of LSJTRG and ABC’s cross, such as in planning this rally (Acting for a Better Community Organizing Team, 2008).
to the state Supreme Court and we will be heard later this summer. The fight is not over and we are asking that you stand and you fight with us.”

A local high school teacher and a student share the song they wrote called “Democracy Anthem” to protest the state take-over of the public schools. Between speakers the crowd claps and cheers.

Extending to a global focus, Cynthia Peters from *The Change Agent* states,

> We need nothing less than all of our minds to solve the problems we are facing today. We need broad based social change movements with deep roots in all communities. This means that educators need to work with anti-foreclosure, environmental justice, immigrant reform and peace groups. Together we can stop the militarization and corporatization of our daily lives. We need education but we don’t need just any kind of education. We need an education that empowers and that frees our mind and helps us unfold as human beings.

An adult literacy student and intern reads the Declaration Statement—a statement that calls for united action among advocates for public education in the face of unjust educational reforms. Over 200 signatures were collected on the declaration statement, including participants at the conference, and will be sent to local, state, and national elected officials (see Appendix 1). Other speakers, including national adult education advocates, make connections between the ongoing wars and the privatization of public services, including education.

On the sidewalk, people gather together holding signs that read “Books not Bombs,” “Literacy is a Civil Right,” “Our Schools are not for Sale,” and “Defend Public Education,” to listen to the speakers and music, and to participate in the symbolic actions. They wave their signs at the rush-hour traffic and receive honks of support. The rally ends with the drumming of Thunderheart, a traditional Native American drumming group, accompanying the posting of the mini-protest signs on a public display board. Later, the nightly news reports, “A group gathers in downtown St. Louis to voice their support for public education.”

This is a gathering of teachers—a cross the lifespan, of community activists, of union members, of candidates running for political office, adult learners, parents and elected officials. Despite the pressures of silencing of teachers, outsourcing of curriculum, high-stakes standardized tests, reduced education budgets owing to the war in Iraq, teachers, parents, and students are standing together to call for justice. On the steps of the Old Courthouse, the boundaries between traditional grade levels, between teacher and activist, and between the school and the street disappear. Here, teachers use their voices to defend public education and stand in solidarity with educators across the nation and world.

Several weeks before, members of LSJTRG and ABC’s gathered to plan the rally following Meredith Labadie’s workshop on Teaching for Social Justice in Reading and Writing Workshops. During this and subsequent meetings we brainstormed slogans for the signs, generated a list of speakers and musicians, designed fliers, wrote a press release, obtained a permit for the rally, and circulated announcements and leaflets. We thought of ways to make the rally interac-
tive and participatory, including circulating a declaration calling for education to be considered as a civil right and having mini-protest signs available where people could pen their own message.

The rally captures the essence of the LSJTRG—the power and potential of a group of educators working together—inside and outside the classroom—to use literacy and language to make changes in society. Many of the teachers who planned and participated in the rally are members of LSJTRG. Many of them appear in the pages of this book. These teachers work in different schools and in different districts. Their students vary in age and range from working-class European Americans to middle-class African Americans to adult immigrants. Whether in or out of the classroom, these teachers are committed to educational practices and outcomes that contribute to freedom and justice—in short, critical literacy education. While exploring social class, gender, sexuality, race, the environment, or human rights with their students and collaborating with other educators to plan a workshop or rally, these educators draw on a set of tools to interrogate social practices, sort through multiple agendas encoded in texts, and to collaborate on ways of acting in more socially just ways.

The LSJTRG is a grassroots, teacher-led professional development group dedicated to exploring and acting on the relationships between literacy and social justice. The intersecting stories of this group of educators are told in the pages of this book. Along the way we set forth a lifespan perspective on critical literacy education, one that draws on popular education and can be utilized across the lifespan.

This project—both the book and the ongoing cultural work of our group—was conceived in the spirit of engaged scholarship. Since 2001, we have been organizing, holding public meetings around social justice issues, conducting inquiry in our classrooms, sharing our analyses, and participating in social justice events. We believed there was something unique about our work together. It was not until 2005 that we learned that other teacher activist groups like our own were springing up all over the United States in cities such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. We were busy building a space where educators could network, learn, and grow with each other. When we looked up, we realized we were not alone in the journey.

We believed there was something very generative about our work together that could serve as a model for other educators, researchers, policy-makers, and activists who are also involved with grassroots educational reform. We decided to formally document our process of working together for educational change. We extended an invitation to people involved in the group to a summer institute to explore the process of writing a book to document our experiences, as individual educators and as a social justice group. Several of the teachers at the institute had already conducted inquiry projects in their classroom that they wanted to write about. Others had not begun the process yet. The institute was a place for us to brainstorm, share, and organize our thoughts.

Many drafts later, we arrive at a book that offers a snapshot of our journey—as individuals and as a group. As educators and citizens who believe education is vital to a healthy democracy, we embarked on this work as a form of praxis—

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theory, practice, reflection, and action (Croteau, Hoynes, & Ryan, 2005). Our research allowed us to delve more deeply into the public domain; our activism inspired our writing and provided us with a grassroots perspective. This book joins these educators’ stories with the history and practices of the teacher inquiry group, providing a twofold emphasis on critical literacy education.

**Literacy Education, Freedom, and Democracy**

In our work as literacy educators—with GED, high school, elementary, and teacher education students—we are constantly reminded of the importance of guiding our students as readers, writers, and thinkers while at the same time educating towards social responsibility. Children, adolescents, or adults who have had, or are expected to have, the most difficulty with literacy are commonly the most oppressed by literacy. It is these students and their teachers who stand to benefit the most from developing critical literacy practices within socially just learning spaces.

Critical literacy education takes many shapes and forms (for reviews of critical approaches to literacy see Collins & Blot, 2003; Janks, 2000; Luke, 2000; Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997; Street, 2003). When critical frameworks guide literacy education, they are referred to as critical literacy or participatory literacy education. Critical literacy education has deep roots in the struggle of historically
marginalized people to gain literacy and political power (e.g. Clark, 1990; Freire, 1970a; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1997). Because of the links between literacy and freedom, access, and economic mobility, literacy has always been political and central in struggles for freedom (e.g. Monaghan, 1991; Moore, Monaghan, & Hartman, 1997; Prendergast, 2003). Critical literacy education includes practices that disrupt or critique dominant knowledge–power relationships that perpetuate unequal gender, race, and class relations and instead center dialogue, debate, and dissent, features of a democracy. We envision critical literacy education as the vehicle for building more democratic communities.

There are many good introductions to the theory and practices of critical literacy (e.g. Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Stevens & Bean, 2007; Vasquez, 2003) and demonstrations of critical literacy in classrooms (Cowhey, 2006) and out-of-school spaces (Comber, Nixon, & Reid, 2007; Morrell, 2008). We have accounts of how children in elementary classrooms practice critical literacy (e.g. Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001; Henkin, 1998; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Powell, Cantrell, & Adams, 2001; Sweeney, 1997; Vasquez, 2004) as well as accounts of critical literacy in middle and high school (e.g. Morrell, 2008; Myers & Beach, 2004; Rogers, 2002), adult education (e.g. Brookfield, 2005; Degener, 2001; Rogers & Kramer, 2008), and teacher education (e.g. Comber, 2006; Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2005; McDaniels, 2006). Our work departs from earlier work in our dual emphasis on critical literacy education—within classrooms across the lifespan and within the context of a teacher-led professional development group. Here, we sort through what we mean by critical literacy education—discussing each of the terms associated with the concept in turn, “critical,” “literacy,” and “education.”

**Critical**

I am linking the struggle of men and women of color as a common struggle—and teaching implicitly that feminism is a set of issues and actions that is relevant in the lives of men as well as women.

(Carolyn Fuller, Adult Education and Literacy Teacher)

What does the term “critical” mean in critical literacy education? We use the construct of “critical frameworks” to refer to the myriad ways in which educators practice critical literacy to create socially just learning spaces. There is no one critical framework or set of methods or approaches that characterizes a critical teacher. A critical framework includes an analysis and critique of systems of oppression and the tools for social action. See Table 1.1 for a list of the social justice issues that are explored throughout this book.

Critical frameworks start from the assumption that literacy learning includes a struggle over power and knowledge (Edelsky, 1999; Freire, 1970b; Janks, 2000; Luke, 2000; Richardson, 2003). In Carolyn’s voice above, we see that struggle is a common theme in society, and is therefore in our educational frameworks. In the sense that knowledge is never neutral but is defined by those who have access to resources, critical education practices seek to redistribute
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power/knowledge relationships. This redistribution means recognizing, challenging, and rebuilding relationships that are fundamentally constructed out of the fabric of oppression. To do this, we need multiple frameworks to notice and name oppression. Thus, we recognize the multiplicity of critical perspectives from anti-racism, class-based instruction, culturally relevant instruction, multicultural education to feminist teaching. Our stance is that they all add to the struggle for human liberation.

Underlying each of these frameworks is a set of values that conflicts with the values of dominant institutions. For example, underlying culturally relevant instruction is the purpose of recognizing the values and perspectives and the ways of knowing of people who historically have been silenced. When such values become part of the curriculum they often conflict with the values of the institutions themselves. Structuring a curriculum where the stories of people of color are elicited and heard, without interruption and critique, conflict with the Eurocentric norms and values of dominant institutions. Similarly, structuring a classroom that is community centered rather than centered on the individual runs counter to the dominant values of individualism, authority, and competition that comprise society.

Thus, engaging in instructional practices from any of these perspectives, we would argue, is engaging in a form of resistance and struggle, a struggle that opens space for traditionally marginalized voices and, at the same time, restructures the institutions themselves. Thus, the action component of critical literacy is essential in the movement towards designing socially just spaces (e.g. Bomer & Bomer, 2003; Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001; Heffernan & Lewison, 2005; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006). Action often occurs at the local level, as a response to the conditions of day-to-day life, but critical educators constantly move back and forth between the local and the global.

Critical frameworks recognize the politics of literacy in society, the struggle for power inherent in literacy movements, and centers action. In the present society in which we live, oppression is perpetuated by globalization, the distribution of wealth, and war. Literacy frameworks in a global society cannot remain too local, in other words. Often, in order to change local conditions, conditions of oppression and injustice across the globe come into play. A “critical” framework takes us beyond immediate circumstances to the larger structures that limit our ability to make change. Critical frameworks bring awareness to heightened world conflicts, increased international connectedness, and the need for solving common world problems.

**Literacy**

Yes, indeed, among other topics, my journalism students were writing some stories that dealt with homosexuality.

(Janet DePasquale, High School English and Journalism Teacher)

What does literacy refer to in critical literacy education? As others have convincingly argued, a more apt term to capture reading and writing practices is “literacies.” Literacies are conceptualized as situated social practices, imbued with
power and ideology and used to accomplish certain social goals. Literacies refer
to the myriad social practices that purposefully use language and texts. Texts,
then, are any social artifact that produces meaning. Texts include literature, web
pages, instant messages, advertisements on the sides of buses, a concert schedule,
a parking ticket, and so on.

Literacies not only refer to the writing and reading of texts in the traditional
sense, however. Conceptualizing the multiple dimensions of literacy broadens
the edges to include multiple modalities and the concept of designing (Cope &
critical literacy education might reshape how children and youth come to know
the ways in which literacy can be powerful. That is, people learn literacies by
examining both the construction of texts and constructing new texts. The focus
shifts from the individual user to the collaboration between users with the idea
of design, drawing on the notion that learning happens in the social interactions
around the decoding and design of texts.

More and more, people represent themselves and others in ways that break
boundaries, from web pages to MySpace and Facebook pages to multimedia
sharing sites such as YouTube. The concept of multiple literacies is particularly
important for adults, who read and design multiple types of texts because of work
and life experiences. We rely on a conception of designing texts that considers how
people draw on tools at hand in this design (Kress, 2003; New London Group,
1996). Tools can be literacy practices such as writing, design of a web page, or blog-
ging, or critical literacy practices such as questioning social practices, seeking out
information from diverse sources, or organizing for a rally.

Different social practices are comprised of different types of texts and literacy
practices. Schooled literacy, as Hicks (2002) and Street (2005) have argued, often
consists of functional approaches to reading and writing that are decontextualized
from the lives and realities of learners. Family and community literacy practices,
on the other hand, consist of the literacies that people use in their everyday lives to
accomplish social projects. These include reading directions, negotiating a play
station, skimming a new magazine, and finding the correct forms needed to apply
for an identification card. Many studies have shown that people considered illiter-
ate in school settings are often quite literate in their homes and communities. At
stake is what counts as literacy and who defines what it means to be literate.

Literacies are political. In the quote above, Janet writes that her students were
writing about gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and trans-gender issues (GLBT), in the
context of a journalism class with a public project, the school newspaper. The
students were writing news stories, a traditional literacy practice. Imbued in
Janet’s statement is the recognition that the practices of the students were not
politically neutral. In fact, Janet foregrounds the students’ work as intentional.
Further, literacy has always been deeply enmeshed with privilege and oppression.
The continued legacy of denying people access to literacy education based on
race, language, and ability continues today as high-stakes tests, punitive state
laws, and prescriptive curricula are put into place for children living in poverty
including linguistic and cultural minorities. Such tests and curricula continue to
secure and preserve literacy education as a right for the privileged, white classes
in society. As a result, linguistic and cultural minorities have restricted access to the political, economic, and educational structures necessary to gain equitable outcomes in society. However, movements have also used literacy as a tool to construct more complete notions of the intersections between literacy, language, schooling, and power. Movements for bilingual education, for example, talk back to the No Child Left Behind Act in order to advocate for the rights of English language learners in U.S. classrooms.

**Education**

We are the people and so we do have the power to make changes. We need to own our power. This is what I learned long ago from the women’s movement.

(Sarah Beaman-Jones, Literacy Program Developer)

What does *education* refer to in critical literacy education? In the quote above, Sarah draws from her experiences in the movement for women’s rights as a tool towards educating, in her case, adults working towards empowerment through literacy education. Sarah brings her understanding of how knowledge and power is constructed as well as how leadership emerges from her participation in a social movement to her work as an educator. Both contexts share the belief that to realize the goal of democracy, all people must have both equal access and opportunity for social, economic, and political power. Education has also been described as a vehicle realizing democratic ideals. Indeed, many philosophers have argued that it is in education that people can realize the multiple possibilities and positions that exist around any question (Dewey, 1966; Greene, 1988; Palmer, 2007). The women’s movement also worked towards the idea that each person holds a standpoint that is essential to understanding. Education, as well, involves taking up positions and finding one’s voice and perspective.

Education is the process of naming one’s experiences and world and, in the process, transforming these experiences. Education, then, is a dialogue between participants—positioning both students and teachers as learners. Dialogue plays a central role in an education that is liberatory. The teacher’s role is not, to use Freire’s (1970b) metaphor of a banking approach to education, to deposit information into the students’ heads but rather to “mine” resources and knowledge that students have at their disposal. People of all ages have linguistic and cultural resources for solving problems and generating new ideas. In this view of education, any cultural worker who is informed in the construction of knowledge—from social activist, political revolutionary, seventh grade math teacher, university professor, religious worker—is an educator.

Education is the process of designing spaces for resistance and problem posing, especially through the process of dialogue. Dialogue around critical issues is what makes a theme into a problem. For example, globalization and the outsourcing of jobs is a theme. But “what is the effect of globalization and outsourcing on the economy of the community” is a question. People move from themes to questions through dialogue, and through dialogue, begin to understand how local problems exist. When education is conceptualized as a process
of dialogue it becomes apparent how similar education is across the lifespan. Education as a process of dialogue is learner driven and based on authentic problems that come from everyday life.

**Critical Literacy Education: A Framework**

At the heart of this book are educators working with students and other educators/activists to use literacy practices in ways that make changes in people’s lives. Critical literacy education has most often been applied in adult literacy education in the name of popular education (Clark, 1990; Freire, 2001; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1997). To address our concern with a lifespan perspective, we have joined a framework for critical literacy education with the popular education model to illustrate how we conceptualize learning. Figure 1.1 visually represents our framework for critical literacy education across the lifespan. This framework emerges from the individual and collective actions and practices of members of the LSJTRG and reflects the tools used by both individuals and communities to practice critical literacy.

**Intentions of Critical Literacy Education**

At the center of the figure we have printed the words, “equity, access, and outcomes” but we envision that depending on the short-term/long-term goals and intentions of individuals or groups, the center of the framework might be “human rights,” “democracy,” or “social justice.” We keep intentions at the center of the framework to emphasize that “so what” of our critical literacy prac-
tices. Between the intentions and the critical literacy practices is a cycle or process of popular education (Freire, 1970a; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1997; Horton, Freire, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990).

**Popular Education**

It is through the process of popular education that the intentions and outcomes of critical literacy are realized. At the root of the popular education model is the belief that people hold the answers to their own problems and worries. These answers are not the product of the individual but the accumulation of the knowledge of all the people in the community. Beyond sharing answers, there is an element of research in which gaps in knowledge are filled by going outside of the group. On this point, Horton (1990) said, “Once you get the people talking about a problem and there’s no solution within the group, which is often the case, then you go outside the group and introduce ideas and experiences that are related to the problem” (Horton, Freire, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990, p. 169). The popular education process relies on horizontal relationships between people, “experts” who provide other information, and organizers who keep the cycle of popular education moving. After gaining all of the information and looking for patterns, the group has the needed knowledge to plan for action. Finally, the cycle ends with action and then reflection towards the posing of new problems.

Learning occurs as people follow this cycle. Horton spoke on this in a conversation with Paulo Freire: “We based our whole thinking on the premise that people learn what they do. Not what they talk about but what they do. And so we made our speech about social equality without saying anything, but by doing it” (Horton, Freire, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990, p. 164). The process of popular education is the very model of participation that creates democratic spaces and teaches democratic processes.

**Critical Literacy Dimensions and Associated Tools**

The four dimensions of the critical literacy framework are: (1) building a community that is sustained over time, (2) developing critical stances, (3) critical inquiry and analysis, and (4) action, advocacy, and social change. Along with each dimension come tools (see Text Box 1.1) that we have seen enacted and developed as people learn to implement critical literacies in classrooms, organizations, and in LSJTRG. Within the dimension of building a community over time, for example, are the associated tools of establishing routines and norms and learning to listen. The dimension of developing critical stances contains the tools of placing information from multiple sources in historical and political contexts, for example. In the dimension of critical inquiry and analysis, we see individuals using the tools of inquiry such as finding patterns between sources and critically examining information gathered from multiple sources including the World Wide Web. As part of the fourth dimension of action, advocacy, and social change, we see the tools of building alliances outside of the group, or using the Internet to organize people from different organizations to think about
I. Building and Sustaining a Learning Community
The following set of tools is designed to help build and sustain a learning community, particularly for groups.

- Establishing routines and norms
- Celebrations
- Balancing individual and collective needs
- Learning to listen
- Recognizing and naming struggles
- Open invitations to participate
- Collective decision-making
- Opportunities for leadership.

II. Developing Critical Stances and Multiple Perspectives
The following set of tools is designed to broaden and deepen the content knowledge of people within the group, recognizing that each educator brings a wealth of resources into the group setting.

- Reading widely and deeply
- Making local/global connections
- Placing information in context
- Finding relationships between sources
- Seeking out multiple, non-dominant perspectives.

III. Critical Inquiry and Analysis (Systems of Oppression)
The following set of tools is designed to equip educators with the methods for engaging productively in a problem-posing/problem-solving dynamic in their classrooms, community, and within the group itself.

- Reflecting through multiple modes
- Considering histories of participation
- Finding patterns and generating theories
- Planning for action
- Critically reading and evaluating information from web-based sources
- Engaging in inquiry processes
- Reflecting on group processes and dynamics.

IV. Action, Advocacy, and Social Change
The following set of tools is designed to support individuals and groups who are moving from dialogue and reflection to action.

- Recognizing incremental change
- Building alliances
- Appreciating different roles in activism
- Drawing on previous experiences
- Developing skills of activism/advocacy
- Using technology to organize for social action.
actions together. The list of tools that we have generated here are necessarily flex-
ible and the list is in no way exhaustive of the tools that we know people draw on
to design critical literacy education.

People and groups can enter into critical literacy practices from different
entry points. The dimensions and tools are also intertwined. Part of constructing
a critical stance is to explore one’s potential to apply tools of critical inquiry and
analysis to the problems that emerge in local contexts and to consider their
global connections. Critical educators recognize that their viewpoints are part of
who they are and embody those viewpoints through their actions. They listen to
their students and colleagues, who represent many viewpoints, beliefs, under-
standings, languages, practices, and worries. They spend focused time thinking
about how their literacy instruction and the practices they encourage are a form
of action. They also consider how the conversations about social class, race,
stereotypes, difference, justice, and equity that occur in classrooms and profes-
sional circles infuse their personal lives and actions. The bi-directional arrows in
the model designate this feature of the framework. We see the critical literacy
lifespan framework as a model of how groups of people (or individuals) create
the dispositions to work towards social change through literacy practices.

**Contribution of the Framework**

The theories and methods of critical literacy education through a popular educa-
tion framework (for example, Morrell’s (2008) work with youth in participatory
community action projects) are becoming more common in K-12 education
although hesitancy still exists about integrating these types of projects into
primary grades. Less often, however, do we hear about the tools needed to
support educators as they continue to broaden and deepen their own critical lit-
eracy practices. In our work with educators who teach across the lifespan—from
primary grades to adult education—we have found it necessary to broaden our
lens to consider critical literacy education from cradle to grave. As we will
demonstrate across the chapters in this book, many of the processes and con-
ditions for critical literacy education are the same, regardless of age, grade, or
experiences. As we move between the case studies of classrooms based in teacher
inquiry and the examples of collective action and practices through LSJTRG, we
will demonstrate the dimensions of the critical literacy framework. In the next
section, we discuss the importance of critical literacy education in professional
development settings.

**Teacher-led Professional Development**

This lifespan approach assumes that educators who teach any grade across the
lifespan can engage with critical literacy education and that, as teachers, they
must themselves experience the process of learning to be critically literate. How-
ever, given the strict requirements of state and federal standards, profes-
sional development is more inclined to focus on the details of literacy instruc-
tion, including standards, testing, and designing instruction that prepares
children, adolescents, or adults to do well on tests. Indeed, in the era of neoliberal education reforms, opportunities for teachers to focus on cultural and linguistic diversity, anti-racist instruction, and social justice are rare. Further, professional development offers few opportunities for teachers to construct their own understandings around critical literacy that emerge from their local contexts.

There are limitations to current models of professional development for teachers. Cochran-Smith & Lytle argue that periodic staff development days do not support learning for experienced teachers. Most effective professional development occurs over time, rather than in isolated moments of staff development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). In *Learning from Teaching in Literacy Education*, Rodgers and Pinnell (2002) describe “what is and what could be in professional development” (p. 2). “What is” for professional development includes district-based professional development, conferences, school-based teacher education and school-based professional development early interventions. They ask, “what if we had the power to buy whatever we need to improve literacy education? What would we want?” (p. 5). They argue that “what could be” needs to be based in broad and systemic-wide approaches to professional development. Examples might include integration of research and practice, and long-term professional development with clear parameters. To this list we might add ongoing teacher-led professional development focused on problems that arise out of teaching, which span traditional grade-level boundaries.

Teacher networks, inquiry communities, and other school-based collectives in which teachers and others conjoin their efforts to construct knowledge can become the major contexts for professional development in this model (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Fecho, 2000; Picower, 2007). On the power of teachers working together, Atwell (1998) writes, “one teacher can do great things, a community of teachers can move a mountain” (p. 20).

As learners, teachers are not often asked to think seriously about matters of inequity (e.g. Delpit & Kilgour-Dowdy, 2002; Fecho, 2000; Lewison, Flit, & Van Sluys, 2002). Nor are teachers who focus on creating socially just spaces likely to get the professional development and support that is needed to sustain their teaching (Picower, 2007). And yet, inquiring into how literacy and social justice are linked is important because teachers often expect their students to be similar to them as mainly white, middle-class females (Delpit, 1995). Many of the teachers’ notions of literacy, language, and development are based on their own ideologies formed by the theories of a predominantly white male academia and administration, and therefore their teaching reflects gendered, raced, and classed behaviors. Further, white teachers often believe that racism has nothing to do with them because they do not consider themselves to be racist or prejudiced (Cochran-Smith, 1995, 2000). Teachers must first explore issues of race in their own lives (Howard, 1999; Stokes-Brown, 2002; Tatum, 1994). However, it is difficult to accomplish such sensitive interrogations in traditional professional development forums.
Teacher Research

Teacher research offers educators a space to experiment with their practices, theorize about patterns, connect their learning with professional literature, and reflect on their practices in deep and meaningful ways. A review of the literature suggests that inquiry is embedded throughout various phases in an educator’s life. Many collaborative groups, for example, are connected to teacher education programs (Cook-Sather, 2002; French, García-Lopez, & Darling-Hammond, 2002; Nieto, 2003; Picower, 2007; Wiedeman-Ramirez, 2002). Other collaborative groups comprised teacher educators studying their own practices (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 1999; Cooper, 2006; Hyland & Noffke, 2005). Hyland & Noffke (2005), for example, report on a long-term action research project that investigated the teaching of an elementary social studies methods course for pre-service teachers within a social justice framework. Teachers may come together to inquire into literacy practices without a specific focus on social justice. Or, other inquiry groups arise out of collective needs or mutual interests or concerns of practicing teachers (e.g. Duncan-Andrade, 2005). The Mapleton Teacher
Research Group and their inquiry around spelling development is a prime example of a longitudinal form of professional development within the context of one school (Chandler-Olcott, 2001; Chandler-Olcott & The Mapleton Teacher Research Group, 1999).

Teacher Activist Groups

“If your aim is to change society,” as Myles Horton wrote, “you have to think in terms of which small groups have the potential to multiply themselves and fundamentally change society” (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1997, pp. 57). Teacher networks, inquiry communities, and other school-based collectives in which teachers collaboratively construct knowledge can help develop professional development models whose aims are to fundamentally change society (Abu El-Haj, 2003; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Fecho, 2000; Fecho & Allen, 2003; Powers & Hubbard, 1999).

When educators are given the space to determine their areas of strengths and the areas of their practice where they need support, genuine learning and development can occur. While there is abundant work on the importance of teachers working together, we know less about teachers working together to design socially just learning spaces. Picower (2007) describes the support of critical inquiry groups in a multi-racial group of first-year teachers teaching in the New York City School system. Lewis and Ketter’s (2003) study of a longitudinal professional development group describes how white, middle-class teachers learn to discuss sensitive issues in children’s literature through a community of practice in Iowa. In Massachusetts, a critical literacy inquiry group that conducted teacher research projects included practicing teachers enrolled in a graduate level course (Luna, Botelho, French, Iverson, & Matos, 2004).

In summary, educators need support systems to continue to work towards social change. Around the country, teacher activist groups are emerging to support social justice education and socially just policies (Miner, 2005/2006). Many of these groups are located in cities where teachers are increasingly under attack and silenced in the name of accountability and standards. We have listed several of these groups here that we have come into contact with through our participation in a national coalition called TAG—Teacher Activist Groups (See Text Box 1.2). We know that there are additional teacher activist groups around the country. Teacher activism nourishes the design of critical literacy education in the classroom. It takes us closer to the struggles we explore with our students.

Engaged Scholarship

At the heart of our teaching, research and activism is a commitment to the potential that literacy practices can build a more socially just society. We take responsibility for uncovering, building, and advocating for the types of social practices that can be used to make the world a better place. We side with scholars such as Palmer (2007) and Collins (1998) who advocate for a “visionary pragmatism” that integrates the possibility of acting in the world as it is (unjust) without losing sight of the world as
it might be (just). This means that we flexibly take on roles as teachers, researchers, and activists, transforming ourselves and society in the process.

We intend for the narratives of each of the teachers and the group (as well as the dialogue between teachers and the group) to be read as an example of “engaged scholarship.” Engaged scholarship looks very much like the process of critical literacy education, but allows us to position our work within a tradition of scholarship about our work as knowledge builders. Engaged scholarship is a problem-posing process (Freire, 1970b; Morrell, 2004), taking us from our observations and dialogues to broader understandings of cultures, institutions, and societies. The tools we have outlined in the critical literacy education framework cut across our work as teachers, researchers, and activists.

As people committed to social justice, we seek to enter into teaching and research relationships that are consistent with the way in which we make sense of the world. The theories and methods of our engaged scholarship draw on the overlapping traditions of teacher research (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001),

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**Text Box 1.2 Teacher Activist Groups**

Many of the groups included below were cited in a *Rethinking Schools* article (Au, Bigelow, Burant, & Salas, 2005/2006):

- San Francisco, CA, Teachers 4 Social Justice: www.t4sj.org
- Chicago, IL, Teachers for Social Justice: www.teachersforjustice.org/
- Oakland, CA, Education not Incarceration: www.ednotinc.org/
- Portland, OR, Portland Area Rethinking Schools: http://web.pdx.edu/~bgds/PARS/
- St. Louis, MO, The Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group: www.umsl.edu/~lsjtrg
- Harlem, NY, Education for Liberation: www.edliberation.org/
- Boston, MA, Education Action!: www.ed-action.org/
- Atlanta, GA, Atlantans for Better Schools and Social Change: https://www.student.gsu.edu/~jsauer2/teachers/Teachersforsocialchange_index.htm
- Los Angeles, CA, Association of Raza Educators: www.razaeducators.org/
- Washington, DC, Save our Schools: www.saveourschoolsdc.org/
- Milwaukee, WI, Rethinking Schools: www.rethinkingschools.org/
- Milwaukee, WI, Educators Network for Social Justice: www.ensj.org
- Teacher Activist Groups: www.teacheractivistgroups.org/
action research (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998), participatory action research (Morrell, 2004), feminist research (e.g. Brantlinger, 1999; Lather, 1991; Naples, 2003), and activist scholarship (Croteau, Hoynes, & Ryan, 2005; Guajardo, Guajardo, & del Carmen Casaperalta, 2008; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Urrieta & Mendez Benavidez, 2004). The thread that we draw on from all of the traditions is their engagement with social life, an emphasis on collaboration, and a deliberate focusing on the problems that face society. Engaged scholarship happens within and alongside our communities, at a local level, and is sustained over time. Further, as educators, the process of doing “engaged scholarship” reinforces the frameworks of critical literacy education that we seek to develop in our classrooms (Guajardo, Guajardo, & del Carmen Casaperalta, 2008).

Within each case represented in this book, and across the entirety of the book, the multiple authors straddle the traditional lines of teacher-researcher-activist. Each of the case studies were conceived in the spirit of more deeply understanding and changing a social problem through the tools of literacy education. We (Becky, Melissa, and Mary Ann) worked with each author, keeping the larger structure of the book in mind, to develop her understandings through the process of writing the chapter (from brainstorming, to analysis, to writing and reflecting).
The authors in each case draw on a range of methods including discourse analysis, narrative analysis, grounded theory, memoir, and document analysis. The projects span a school year, unit of study, multi-year project, or a single day. Some drew on data they collected in their classrooms and others are of the variety of educational memoirs, where the teachers reflect critically on their experiences and practices. Often, in the process of researching and writing the chapters, the authors redesigned their practices, another form of social action.

We looked at the teachers’ case studies individually and as a group to analyze patterns and threads about critical literacy education across the lifespan. We moved back and forth between the teachers’ cases and the research literature in an iterative manner. In order to conduct cross-case analyses, we intentionally asked participants in LSJTRG to read each of the chapters and look for patterns, themes, and connections across the chapters. In this way, other teachers were put in the position to theorize about the teaching and learning in each of the chapters. This analysis and discussion helped us to build the critical literacy education framework.

Similarly, we view LSJTRG as an ongoing action research project that cycles through various stages. We document our group’s processes through fieldnotes, audiotapes of meetings, analysis of structures, and processes. We present and write about our group. We notice how elements of our roles as teachers-researchers-activists are present in both our classrooms and in the groups we participate in out of school. Through the practice of constructing this text, we also built useful skills such as writing for publication, presenting at conferences, advocating for best practices, and developing tools of advocacy and organizing. Telling our stories of resisting injustice is a form of social activism and advocacy.

Members of the LSJTRG have collaboratively written this book. As you might expect, the book is filled with the unique voices of teachers working towards social justice through critical literacy education. There are, needless to say, many voices from LSJTRG that have not been included in the book but whose inspiration can be found on every page.