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# Paying Attention to Procedural Texts: Critically Reading School Routines as Embodied Achievement

*How might changing our everyday routines validate new ways of doing, being, and achieving at school?*

## CRITICAL LITERACY AND ALTERNATE STORIES OF ACHIEVEMENT

What counts as achievement in literacy classrooms is often a print-based story of literacy skill mastery that reads the same despite diverse classrooms, children, teachers, and texts. A substantial body of critical literacy research questions unproblematic readings of stigmatizing texts that privilege a narrow definition of literacy (see Janks, 2000; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Vasquez, 2001). Lewison, Leland, and Harste write that critical literacy practices “encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice” (2008, p. 3). From this perspective, achievement includes critical readings of the world, readings that don’t necessarily start with a problematic text and preset outcome. Alternate stories of achievement emerge through critical literacy practices, often revealed when we pay attention to the procedural texts that organize our lives. In this article, we share three classroom stories where we pay attention, interrogate routines, and critically read the world.

Literacy practices are, by definition, ideological (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1995). Texts that require critical readings are all around us in the language that constructs our worlds, from the products we buy to the most mundane routines; they are not located only in a particular text or genre. When we look and listen closely to the verbal and nonverbal signs around us, we notice the patterned ways that power moves through language and shapes how students are successful in the everyday world. Here, we look

closely at the way power circulates through texts and school routines in everyday moments—shopping for back-to-school supplies, initiating a class meeting, or responding to a memo about a new school policy. We believe that it is crucial to pay attention to routines to see how these automatic and taken-for-granted ways of belonging mark achievement and participation in schools.

## A REAL WORLD ROUTINE: READING PENCIL BOXES AS TEXTS

Even the most banal activities are infused with power-laden texts. We believe many teachers will recognize an example from Sarah’s teaching that demonstrates the incorrigible nature and insidious positioning in back-to-school routines, such as picking up a few extra classroom supplies.



*Our elementary school had a significant portion of families for whom purchasing school supplies was an economic hardship. I knew some of my fifth graders wouldn’t have some materials, and I often quietly supplied these in the first week. On one trip to purchase the pencil boxes from a local Target, I began the search for boxes in different colors so that the kids could choose their box. I wanted to provide a small element of ownership over their supplies. Wandering around the bins and shelves, I came up with only two color choices for pencil boxes in the lowest price bracket, pink and blue. Faced with this economically appealing, but gendered choice, I began to fill my cart with 10 blue boxes. Realizing what I had done—valuing blue over pink—I switched out a few for pink. Then, frustrated, I put them all back. I walked around a bit more, saw a colleague, and asked her what she thought. Should I avoid the boxes altogether or maybe purchase half pink, half blue? She seemed baffled by my questions . . . after all, they were only pencil boxes, right?*

*I stood in front of the boxes, and considered. I still thought that the blue boxes would likely be more appealing for more kids than the pink, but I knew that the*

*blue and pink boxes were going to be interpreted in different ways. Blue as a gendered male marker, blue as a color that dominated the neighborhood gang, possibly blue as “neutral.” Pink as a “girl color,” pink as the alternative to blue, marginalized. Would I be creating a situation where a boy in my class would have to ally himself with blue or face ridicule? I questioned why it would be appropriate for girls to have blue but not for boys to select pink. I didn’t even know the kids yet, and here I was negotiating assumptions and considering what tensions pencil box color might weave into the social fabric of the classroom.*

*I began to wonder why there were no other choices, and after ten minutes of thinking, wandering, and moving pencil boxes around, I found a clerk who heard my dilemma and looked at me as if I were out of my mind. She calmly mentioned that Walmart might be a better choice if I couldn’t find what I was looking for in their selection. Since I was shopping in that specific Target because of their generous education programs in our school, this made me feel frustrated, conflicted, and ineffective.*

*The ritualized practice of purchasing literacy tools became a dilemma for me, and there didn’t seem to be a good solution. I knew my students were faced with this same situation, as this particular store was within walking distance of our school and the supplies I requested were often available there. Some students, those with economic flexibility, would be able to pick and choose from a wide variety of pencil box shapes, sizes, colors, pop culture icons, etc., while the students with more limited budgets would be in the same situation I was—pink or blue and all that comes with it. So what should be done? Do I change my classroom practices that rely on the portability of pencil boxes? Why did it matter? Why does it still matter?*



For Sarah, the color of a pencil box is a text that matters. Standing in the store aisle, she came face to face with issues of power wrapped up in the seemingly innocuous routine of preparing to go “back to school.” Her cultural consciousness (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) sharpened her perception of the tangle of unacceptable messages produced by the color choices for a commonplace literacy tool. We know that children face such choices every day, choices that are already there and blatantly gendered, raced, and classed. Moreover, all children are not equally empowered to join in the middle class ritual of “back-to-school” shopping. Some kids in Sarah’s school came fully equipped with their own carefully selected school supplies. Unlike the students who needed

a teacher-supplied pink pencil box, theirs were emblazoned with Barbie, Transformers, or some other pop culture icon.

Sarah was left questioning the need for an individual set of supplies for each child and recognized the tension as a possible inquiry to conduct with students. Why not have collective supplies distributed around the room? While this might disrupt one small aspect of the normalizing function of schooling that individuates and separates children, isn’t there pleasure in having your own things, in opening a brand new box of pointy crayons and breathing in the waxy hope of a fresh start to the school year?

## ENGAGING THE NEXUS: IDENTIFYING ROUTINES

### Routines as Critical Literacy

Sarah’s pencil box vignette illustrates the need to look closely at everyday moments to uncover the taken-for-granted assumptions and power relations that exist in unremarkable activities. We engage in everyday activities without noticing the ways in which our actions signal social practices, actions that are meaningful, valued, and expected in the groups to which we belong (Bourdieu, 1977). In

schools, shared expectations and values circulate in part through *routines*, daily automatic ways of doing things. Hasn’t every substitute teacher heard the familiar objection, “But that’s not how you’re supposed to do it” (Wohlwend, 2007b)? In short, school routines are naturalized social practices; they represent expected ways of behaving that elicit automatic cooperation and recognition from other people in a particular place (see Table 1 for examples of back-to-school routines). In fact, these practices become so automatic, we hardly notice using them, and yet they mark us as legitimate members of a common community (Scollon, 2001).

In the next example, we use nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) to understand the cultural meanings and social effects of everyday routines, like managing school supplies. A nexus is a cluster of taken-for-granted practices that mark one as an “insider,” someone who knows the expected ways of doing things. For example, Sarah experienced an “ah-ha” moment when she recognized the social at work in the nexus of gendered (a “boy” color is more acceptable) and

All children are not equally empowered to join in the middle class ritual of “back-to-school” shopping.

classed (all families can buy) assumptions behind an apparently innocuous back-to-school routine. The nexus of practices in back-to-school shopping enables one to be recognized as an appropriately responsible elementary student (and parent) through a cluster of school, consumer, and popular culture practices: school practices that require buying only the requested supplies, labeling each article with the child's name, and bringing the proper supplies to school on the first day of classes; consumer practices that require brand recognition or price comparison at several stores; and school policies that might prohibit items decorated with pop culture images from video games.

Nexus analysis involves engaging in, navigating, and changing the inequitable in our taken-for-granted practices (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). To engage the nexus in Sarah's practice, we looked for classroom routines that we as teachers valued and upheld. We identified routines that we established at the beginning of each school year, that we made habitual in our classrooms through repetition, and that we participated in as members of school faculty. We unpacked the routines that ran in the background of daily classroom interactions, looking closely to understand how they elicited automatic cooperation from students and constituted tacitly agreed upon ways of doing things at school. Finally, we acknowledged that changing the nexus requires envisioning new, more equitable routines. We give a few examples from our typical "back-to-school" routines in Table 1.

It is difficult to see the social effects of routines that we ourselves advocate because they fade into the landscape of schedules and structures.

As teachers, we are used to closely observing classroom conditions and student activity. However, it is difficult to see the social effects of routines that we ourselves advocate because they fade into the landscape of schedules and structures that make our classrooms run smoothly. Nexus analysis makes the social work in routines visible by looking at points where automatic practices produce moments of conflict and rupture, as in the pencil box dilemma. In this context, dilemmas are trouble spots that highlight what it takes to maintain the status quo; this visibility opens a space for critique where we can imagine alternatives and disruptions, and thereby change the nexus (see Table 1). After identifying a

range of routines in our own classrooms, we examine one nexus of routines that produced moments of rupture—group problem-solving routines and social action routines.

Two events made each of us question the ways our classrooms and schools operated. We looked closely within these events to examine how clusters or nexuses of ordinary practices structured classroom activity and how these routines positioned teachers and students within the classroom and the school. As we relate these events—a class meeting and a faculty committee meeting—we will describe how they helped us to discover how routines not only keep things in place, but also create possibilities for disrupting and transforming school. By paying attention and looking closely at everyday moments in schools, we've noticed a tension between the routines

Table 1. Examples of backgrounded procedural routines: Back to school

Engaging the Nexus: Identifying Routines	Navigating the Nexus: Unpacking Tacit Understandings	Changing the Nexus: Envisioning Critical Literacy Practices
Create supply lists and submit to the main office for distribution.	Teachers decide which materials are needed for success. Materials need to be affordable; tensions between quantity/quality/durability.	Decide with children and families on what materials are needed; re-evaluate what is needed.
Decide which routines to teach on the first day, second day, etc.	Teachers decide how particular materials should be used.	Critically evaluate routines for positioning and power relations.
Shop for extra school supplies and check with store personnel.	Teachers step in and fill the gap to ensure that children have what they need.	Look at dilemmas and real-life issues as potential student-inquiry projects.
Set up the classroom; label materials with children's names, post schedules.	Teachers decide how to manage bodies, materials, and space.	Establish joint decision-making practices, collaborative daily agendas, class forums; consider self-selected seating.

that control children and teachers to keep things in place and those routines that empower children and teachers to provide a regularly occurring space and set of practices for voicing concerns and planning social action.

### Routines That Keep Us in Place

Schools are filled with embodied achievement: lining up, walking single-file an arm's length away from the wall, raising hands for a turn to speak, sitting just-so on the carpet with hands folded and legs tucked in, writing name and date in the upper left corner of the page before beginning, and on and on. The routines in school allow teachers and students to interact automatically, to recognize each other as members of the same school culture, and to evaluate each other according to how well they perform routines.

Procedural texts document and enforce routines in schools, keeping everything in place: through posted schedules and rules for regulating behavior throughout the school day; through attendance reports and lunch counts for keeping track of students; through administrative binders filled with policies, standards, and step-by-step procedures for everything from filing a discrimination complaint to signing up for a hot lunch. Literacy routines are not neutral acts of interpreting and producing print; rather they involve naturalized ways of “doing and being” (Gee, 2005) that enforce power relations and social expectations for teachers and students, administrators and colleagues, parents and children.

### Routines That Empower Us and Enable Change

Yet for all their standardizing effects, routines shape each of our classrooms in distinct ways. As teachers, we deliberately used routines to strengthen a sense of classroom community. From arrival routines for settling in to end-of-day routines for bringing closure, the everyday practices we perform in our classrooms created a daily rhythm and a cohesiveness that operated through shared expectations. The epitome of community-building routines is the class meeting. We held class meetings to talk through and negotiate the day's agenda, to celebrate new discoveries

or the completion of projects, but most important, to provide a regular forum where children could bring issues to the group.

## NAVIGATING THE NEXUS: UNPACKING TACIT UNDERSTANDINGS

### Paying Attention to Classroom Procedural Texts and Routines



#### *A Complaint about Recess Play: Class Meetings in Karen's First-Grade Classroom*

*Immediately after recess, faces reddened from the January cold, three boys huddled around a round table, advising each other about issues of spacing and spelling as they collaborated over a shared message. Finished, Jeff carried the sheet to the large chalkboard that covered most of the front wall. This message board served as our class forum that held discoveries, questions, best work, photos, lost mittens, messages, and announcements to the class. Jeff's penciled text on the sign read: Throo the hole year lots of people have bein herting are fealings. Like tesing us. [Through the whole year, people have been hurting our feelings. Like teasing us.] (See Figure 1.)*

*Jeff stuck the sign on the chalkboard with a magnet, where it stayed all afternoon. Children often wrote and posted their complaints and concerns in this space, scrawled in pencil on crumpled paper, typed on classroom laptops, or temporarily recorded with chalk in the cramped spaces between papers.*

*First graders used writing to connect with each other, to cement the friendships they built on the playground, and, as in this sign, to express their concerns about the tensions in maintaining these relationships. At the end of the day, Jeff took the sign off the chalkboard and brought it to Community Circle (our term for class meetings), which had three ground rules that were posted on a more permanent classroom sign:*

- *Anyone can call a class meeting, as long as the problem concerns the entire group.*
- *No names are mentioned when describing a problem to the class.*
- *Listen to and respect other people's ideas even when you disagree.*

*In the meeting, Jeff read his sign and children responded. When I pressed for an example of teasing, the boys complained that although others were not “actually making fun of us, people just wouldn't play with us.”*



The routines in school allow teachers and students to interact automatically, to recognize each other as members of the same school culture.

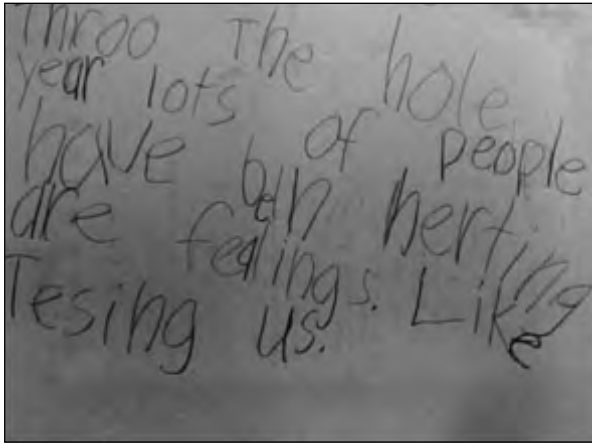


Figure 1. Jeff's sign protesting teasing

Reading this vignette for its tacit understandings reveals the institutional sanction of peer exclusion achieved through a school prohibition on tattling. In a class meeting, when we looked critically at tattling, the discussion shifted from teasing to exclusion and moved the focus from individual victimhood to the social organization of play groups in the first graders' peer culture. As a class, we questioned who should decide play themes, what should happen when children disagreed about what to play, and who should determine access to play groups, materials, and spaces. Our questions bumped up against school rules against tattling, as well as children's popularity and perceived social status. When some children advised that excluded children should "tell a teacher" on the playground, others objected. They complained that tattling was "not fair," arguing that some children used playground rules to "get their own way" by taking over play themes or gaining access to a game by threatening to "tell" playground supervisors. However, school rules prohibiting tattling meant excluded children could be reprimanded for seeking adult help, depending on the recess duty teacher's enforcement/understanding/embodiment of the rule.

By posting a sign on the sharing wall in the classroom and bringing it to the class meeting, Jeff and his friends used critical literacy practices to produce their own procedural texts via classroom routines for raising an issue. When an issue was brought to Community Circle, children discussed the problem and generated possible

solutions, which Karen recorded on whiteboard or chart paper. Typically, children first tended to offer overly general responses, perhaps intended to be teacher-pleasing strategies ("Everybody be nice") or punitive solutions ("Send them to time-out"), rather than looking for collaborative action. Experiences in talking through problems together helped children move beyond blaming others or simply invoking rules. More specific suggestions and equitable solutions emerged from discussions that considered the idea of fairness from multiple perspectives. Prompted by a few questions from Karen—What would that look like? How would you feel about that rule if it were *you*?—children's answers were recorded on a "T-chart" graphic organizer. Community Circle discussions generated further questions, decisions, possible solutions, surveys, votes to create class rules, and votes to overturn class rules, among other literacy practices.

### Paying Attention to Schoolwide Procedural Texts and Routines

The following example from Sarah's school describes a faculty committee meeting. We examine it carefully to explore the tensions in routines that keep us in place and those that have the potential for transformation.



#### Reading Memos about Toilet Paper

*One Spring, our school had problems with excess paper products being stuffed down the toilets, causing overflow, raising health concerns, and creating a great deal of work for the custodial staff. One Friday afternoon, an administrator sent a memo stating that all toilet paper and paper towels would be removed from student restrooms. Teachers would be responsible for doling it out to students. In addition, classroom sign-out sheets should be used to monitor who went into the bathroom. This new policy was met with significant grumbling among staff members, but on Monday morning, all classrooms had two rolls of toilet paper and a stack of paper towels by the door, and teachers were sharing the new procedures with their classes.*

*That same year, I was part of the Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC), a cross-grade-level group of teachers and an administrator who reviewed issues submitted anonymously in a folder in the teacher's lounge. The group read the submissions, brainstormed possible causes and solutions to the issue, and tried to come*

**Our questions bumped up against school rules against tattling, as well as children's popularity and perceived social status.**

up with a resolution. The minutes were then posted with decisions and suggestions. FAC was not a post most teachers looked forward to, as it often focused on managerial issues and decisions tended to be contentious. Less than an hour after reading the memo regarding the new bathroom policy, I began crafting a letter for the FAC. I knew that an administrator, among others, would be there for discussion, and I thought carefully about how to address my concerns with the bathroom policy.

*My letter read:* The new bathroom policy is degrading and humiliating for everyone. Some classes were not even aware that destructive behavior was happening. Why weren't teachers and students contacted for alternative solutions prior to this new rule? This policy does not fit with typical actions taken at our school, and I am concerned about the repercussions it may have on children's sense of self-worth. It is antithetical to what we try to teach about problem solving and personal responsibility on a daily basis. Please reconsider.

*I dreaded broaching the subject with my class, but finally gathered the class together for discussion. From my tone, the kids knew that this was a serious conversation and I tried to be calm, but as I spoke, I know my voice was shaky. It was impossible for me not to reveal my frustration. Students were visibly shocked by the news. Marlena, who was completely beside herself working out the social implications of how the amount of toilet paper you take would look to your peers, asked, "You mean, we have to take it in front of other kids?" Most students couldn't make eye contact, a few puffed "what the . . .," and more than one muttered that they were never going to go to the bathroom. Students translated for Diego, who had just moved to the US from El Salvador, and the color drained from his face.*

*As discussion slowed, I shared my letter to the FAC and explained why I had chosen to respond in that way. The students drew parallels to class meeting boxes they had used in past classrooms and our own format of posing discussion points, a routine we had established early in the year. Marlena said she was going to write a letter. I felt the energy shift in the room when more than one student said, "I'm writing one, too."*

*One of my favorite lines in her letter to the administration said, "How would you feel if you had to walk down the hallway with toilet paper in your hand?" She clearly understood that the teachers and other adults in the school were not expected to follow this policy. By inserting her question, she brilliantly pointed out that maybe the decision makers hadn't thought through the repercussions and just needed to think about how it felt in order to make a change. This kind of flexibility in thinking did not surface in the class discussion; in this case, letter writing provided a space for her to focus on alternatives and possibilities (Vasquez, 2001).*

*The students delivered the letters to the principal's mailbox, and I sent a courtesy email to let her know. As usual, she quickly responded and scheduled a time to talk with the students and listen to their concerns, but the policy was not changed immediately. Meanwhile, the staff FAC meeting was held. After reading my note (submitted anonymously as was the norm), some members were intent on figuring out who would write "like that." A few minutes into this line of discussion, I shared that I had written the note, and the policy needed to change. Most members nodded. The administrator mentioned that this was the first complaint she had received and she would think about it. I was floored because many colleagues had discussed their distaste for the new policy, and I was expecting multiple letters to be read regarding it. Two weeks later, paper products were returned to the bathrooms with the warning that they would be removed again, if needed. The year ended without another major incident. Problem solved?*



Sarah was horrified by this policy because it reduced student/teacher agency and was a sharp deviation from collective problem solving that was typical in the school. Most of the staff were unaware of the bathroom problem's severity and frequency, so the administrative response seemed to come out of nowhere. This new school policy was a heavy-handed use

**Regulated routines become automatic, invisible, and "how things are done."**

of power, publicly exposing requests related to basic bodily functions. Teachers and schools

already exert power by requiring permission and enforcing specifics for myriad routines—like when kids can talk (raise your hand) or walk (two tiles from the wall, single file)—and these regulated routines become automatic, invisible, and "how things are done" in this place. However, this school-imposed routine collided with the routines for critical response that Sarah had established in her classroom nexus of practice.

As in the example of class meetings, critical response was routine in Sarah's classroom. Fifth graders responded critically to everyday issues, ranging from disputes over ownership of a coveted eraser to awareness-raising for animal rescue. They dropped ideas into suggestion boxes, wrote letters to decision makers, filled out forms for peer mediation, etc. Looking closely at the nexus of writing practices in these routines reveals how the mediated action of putting pencil to paper made children's concerns visible and actionable. Through their letters, students were able to respond to an official text, to talk back, to take up

their personal stances, and to express their disagreement. They harnessed their power in a productive redesign of the information, from the class discussion grounded in frustrations and compliance to letter writing focused on taking action toward change (Janks, 2000). By delivering the letters to those in power, they were able to move out of our classroom and approach the larger system structuring the policy.

In Sarah's decisions to share her frustrations and response, she provided space to disagree and time to think about what the consequences could be before taking action. She supported them by alerting the principal that letters were on their way and by voicing her own concerns in the committee meeting. Her class didn't write a letter as a class assignment; some students didn't write letters about this issue at all. However, because the students had experience with taking action, those who chose to write a letter didn't struggle with the "what." They had a starting strategy; they could focus on the "how"—how to make language work for their interests. Teachers have opportunities to make space for these kinds of achievements every day and to help students build a repertoire of what might be done and how. Our choices impact student agency, self-advocacy, and future action that may or may not be taken when faced with challenging situations.

## CHANGING THE NEXUS: ENVISIONING ALTERNATIVES

### Curriculum: Questioning the World with Children

We find the term critical literacy curriculum to be problematic because it implies a preset, bounded curriculum. For us, critical literacy invitations are embedded in larger inquiry themes, and the possibilities for invitations may not be revealed until we're in the midst of inquiry. We support an approach to a critical literacy curriculum that uses a child's question as an invitation to ask, "How can we know more about that? Where can we go? What can we find? What can we do?" and to generate a set of materials. Of course, that doesn't emerge out of a vacuum. As teachers, we have resources and knowledge of potential experiences to contribute to that investigation. We have a responsibility to ask, "So if they're asking this question at this time and in this place, what does that mean?" For us, then, a critical literacy

curriculum starts with the children, develops through their questions, and provides a critical lens that children use to examine multiple perspectives on an issue.

In Sarah's 5th-grade classroom, class meetings often began with children's concerns that they brought to the group for discussion. Sarah responded to the class discussions by gathering shared readings that addressed the children's concerns. Achievement was happening right under our noses; class meetings were critical literacy *in action*. The role of language was foregrounded during these discussions as they struggled with "How do we describe that? How can we talk about it without pointing at people and still really talk about it?" Sarah notes, "That's when I started to realize that successful literacy engagement required me to *pay attention and then make connections*. Later, additional texts beyond those initiated by students provided the class some distance that allowed them to talk about how language works within particular issues.

### Message Boards and Discussion Boxes: Opening a Dialogue with Children

A first step is to set up class routines with structures, such as Message Boards and Discussion Boxes, that offer opportunities for children to respond to real-world texts, to open up routines for public scrutiny, and to bring problems to the group. Message Boards are wall areas, chalkboards, bulletin boards, wikis—any common space that children own and can freely access in order to post public messages. Discussion Boxes are similar to suggestion boxes, thus less public, allowing children to submit ideas, issues, suggestions, or questions for class discussion. Listening to and reading children's concerns are a good start, but it's not really enough. We also need decision-making options, such as class meeting structures, to help children understand, respond, resist, and produce equitable outcomes as well.

### Class Meeting Structure: Responding to Children's Issues

Class meetings enact the expectation that the whole community will address issues that are important to students, demonstrating that, as teachers, we expect and respect children's opinions. Literacy makes this real. As children discuss, key questions and new rules are recorded in the course of the meeting. As demonstrated in the

previous vignettes, class meetings act as sites for disrupting other routines and run counter to practices that silence children’s voices in school: no talking during sustained silent reading, no tattling on the playground, no writing off topic, and other school routines that keep children in their place. Children have ideas for solutions to difficult situations, but some of the rules they legislate for each other are harsh or exclusionary, so we mediate to interrupt potentially hurtful outcomes. Teachers can mediate discussions, also, so that children see the potential for equitable solutions to very real issues.

### Teacher Study Groups: Collaborating Successfully to Change Routines

Teacher study groups provide a regular forum for peer coaching and support. The routine of getting together offers chances to share similar issues that children are raising across classrooms, to discuss teaching responses, and to question as well as validate one another’s practice—all key practices that mitigate against isolation as teachers struggle with difficult situations. Meaningful conversations with colleagues are generative, just as they are with students. Once you can recognize, “It’s not just me in my room going through this,” you create space to make decisions, to take action, and to consider the real consequences of doing nothing. Part of the strength of collaboration in Sarah’s study group was the diverse way teachers approached and engaged with different issues that came up across classrooms, learning about themselves and their students in tandem, as the school supplies dilemma demonstrates.

The “study” in study groups is important. When we regularly gather in study groups to read and engage theories and issues through literature, opportunities arise to critique and study our own teaching practice. We read to stretch our thinking by choosing texts that provoke and challenge us, rather than “how-to” guides that focus on technique and skill. A teacher’s day is filled with countless minute decisions about who gets to sit where, who gets a turn to talk and who doesn’t, who gets which book, or what question to ask next. Many of these decisions appear to be beyond our control, predetermined by the curriculum or by school policy.

We study together because critique alone carries the risk of paralysis. However, critical study

with our peers makes our choices visible and makes collective resistance possible. We both experienced a shock of self-recognition when we realized that we, as teachers, participate in perpetuating a system of schooling that miseducates many children. Before Sarah worked with her study group, she wouldn’t have taken action about something as mundane as pencil boxes. “First of all, I wouldn’t have noticed the gendered and economic constraints, and second, I wouldn’t have done anything. I would never have done that on my own, simply because I wouldn’t have really been looking.” Collaboration operates against the “close your door and teach” cultural model through collective resistance that can work against powerful yet unspoken expectations.

### CONCLUSION

Paying attention to procedural texts and the routines and cultural views of achievement they shape should not be an add-on or isolated event; it should happen every single day. The fabric of our social relationships is made up of the interwoven mesh of everyday processes, and nexus analysis helps us examine them closely. We encourage teachers to be self-consciously aware by listing the routines in their classrooms, as we did in Table 1. What are the everyday practices that structure classroom social life? How do our routines validate certain ways of being students and invalidate others? Looking closely at our own decision making and dilemmas as points of choice and rupture helps reveal ways forward.

We have heard our colleagues say, “I don’t have time for class meetings: we have literacy work, math work, benchmarks, quarterly tests. Class meetings are a nice idea, but I have too much on my plate already.” We argue that we all make time for the things we value. We value an equitable classroom community, so we take children’s concerns seriously. When children come in from the playground, hurt and upset with each other, we resist time-crunch inclinations to tidy things up with a quick “Say you’re sorry and get to work.” Instead, we take a few minutes to listen carefully to issues that they’re bringing in from the playground and make a little time in our day to critically examine the things that matter most to children. After teachers analyze their classrooms for automatic practices (as in Table 1), they could think about issues their students raise as points



of rupture that can reveal hidden social work. We can discuss these nexuses with other colleagues or explore them with our students and work through some of the backgrounded understandings together. Children are struggling to make sense of their positions as raced, classed, and gendered subjects of schooling and the world. How dare we not help them with that!

Of course, we have to juggle things to make room in packed schedules with mandated curriculum or institutional demands. We need to be ready to justify our activities in terms of their potential for achievement: not only for producing meaningful written text, engaging analytically with language, and evaluating rigorous texts, but also for dealing with significant issues of social justice. When Karen discussed recess problems in her classroom, she realized that children were struggling with multifaceted issues that were difficult for adults to mediate (Wohlwend, 2007a). Moreover, the power dynamics of a class meeting are the same as the power dynamics of a faculty or community meeting: we position each other, through our language and turn taking, as leaders and followers, insiders and outsiders.

Negotiating critical literacy situated in children's encounters with power and real-world texts requires us to make tough decisions. That's where teacher study partnerships have been so helpful to us: as support, as a sounding board, and as a problem-solving resource. Sometimes talking over the problem or thinking it through together allows us to step away and see a situation from other perspectives. There's strength in knowing that you are part of a group of colleagues that are engaged in critical work, yet with a range of teaching styles and diverse concerns. In turn, this means that each teacher must pay attention to the other teachers in the study group, as well as the diverse voices of the students in the classroom.

Paying attention is contagious . . . for children and for teachers. Once we begin engaging critically with children's issues, we open up very powerful and generative areas of study. As critical routines become established, it's likely that children will recognize more and more issues to bring to class meetings. Once teachers try productive routines, such as class meetings or inquiry-based curriculum, they see how engaged children are, and how learning comes alive, . . . and so do the teachers they in turn engage with in conversation,

study groups, or professional meetings. Using power productively—not just for critiquing and complaining, but also for making change—is an invigorating way to teach. Paying attention to procedural texts and routines provides a way to create situated, dependable, and regular space so that debate and group problem solving can be negotiated without being devalued. In our minds, this is how we reach our goals for achievement.

### Author's Note

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