Advocacy at the Core:
Inquiry and Empowerment in the Time of Common Core State Standards

Teacher professionalism is at a threshold. Moral purpose and change agentry are implicit in what good teaching and effective change are about, but as yet they are society's (and teaching's) great untapped resources for radical and continuous improvement.

—Michael G. Fullan, "Why Teachers Must Become Change Agents" (1993)

Twenty years after Fullan's charge to teachers, states across the nation are implementing the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), and teachers find themselves at another threshold. Many states have eased into adoption over a span of years, with educators slowly dipping their toes into the waters of curriculum design, implementation, and assessment. As assessment deadlines draw nearer, however, many educators are nervous that with full implementation of the new Standards, our profession's "resources for radical and continuous improvement" will continue to go untapped. I have spent the last three years working with the Standards in my classroom, and have found that the Standards and change are not mutually exclusive. Students can master the Standards within a framework of critical, empowering, and engaging lessons.

My Experience with State Implementation

In 2009, even before the final publication of the CCSS, my state legislature passed Senate Bill 1, also known as the Student Assessment Act (2009). Among other educational reforms, this bill called for the CCSS to be implemented at the classroom level in August 2011 and assessed in May 2012. The scores from the assessment would be used to determine state, district, and school's achievement of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). From a classroom teacher's perspective, this was a rapid turnaround.

To facilitate the implementation of Senate Bill 1, the Department of Education created K–16 networks comprised of teachers, administrators, and instructional leaders from across the state. In the summer of 2010, I was asked to participate in one of these networks as a teacher representing my district. We met one day each month for three years, including summers. One of our first tasks was to deconstruct the new ELA standards (which the state adopted as the "Core Academic Standards") so that as a network we fully understood what they entailed. This work required thoughtful analysis of the reading, writing, language, and speaking and listening Anchor Standards. Once the group as a whole studied the Anchor Standards, we broke into age-level groups to determine what skills and knowledge were needed for mastery of each grade's standards.

We stopped short of delineating each individual learning target; teachers would need to use pre-assessments and their knowledge of their students to determine which specific learning targets would help their students reach mastery. Rather, the job of the network was to agree upon what phrases such as "develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters" would mean to teachers across the state. This process involved hours of study and discussion, as one teacher's definition of these terms differed vastly from that of another teacher. When it came to putting these definitions into teacher-friendly language and describing mastery at the student level, subtle changes in words led to drastically different interpretations. We often worked in teams, with state facilitators moderating discussion when we encountered differences in interpretation.

One benefit of this process was that teachers who were involved in the networks studied the standards intensely for an entire year. We slowly began to implement the standards in our classrooms, taking note of what worked and what did not work. The network served as a sounding board for participating teachers and provided a safe space in which to discuss the successes and failures of early implementation. I can imagine that many teachers who did not participate in the networks felt unprepared when the Department of Education rolled out the standards in late spring of 2011 for implementation the following school year. Although I participated in the network and spent over 50 hours developing a deep understanding of the standards, it was still daunting to consider implementing new standards and moving students to mastery.

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Critical Literacy from Theory to the Classroom

In this era of 21st-century skills and new standards, the term "literacy" can be defined in myriad ways. Citing the work of Alvermann (2002) and Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, and Mueller (2001), Wright and Mahiri (2013) explained, "Literacy is more than basic reading skills; it encompasses a range of forms of communication that are all embedded in social interactions" (p. 124). In *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest* (2009), Patrick Finn divides literacy into two genres: powerful literacy, "the kind of literacy that leads to positions of power and authority," and functional literacy, "literacy that makes a person productive and dependable, but not troublesome" (pp. xv–xvi).

Influenced by theorists such as Freire (1970), Anyon (1980), Kozol (1992), and Willis (1977), Finn challenged teachers to give students "powerful literacy" (2009, p. ix), literacy that engages and enables all students, including those from the poor and working classes. Within systems of oppression, powerful literacy allows citizens to contribute to

society and work for social, economic, and political change (Freire, 1970; UNESCO, 2006). Vasquez (2010) described this literacy as "a way of being," and outlined ten basic tenets of this classroom framework. These tenets include: a) having a critical perspective in the classroom, b) using students' cultural knowledge and multimedia practices, c) reading the world as a socially constructed text, d) understanding that texts are never neutral, e) identifying the ways in which texts position us, f) identifying the ways our own perspectives position us as we read, g) understanding that the concept of truth is mediated through discourse, h) acknowledging the sociopolitical systems that affect power in text, i) recognizing our own power to affect change through text, and j) recognizing that the creation of text can lead to transformation (pp. 2–4).

Stevens and Bean (2007) define this powerful, critical literacy as:

> . . . active questioning of the stance found within, behind, and among texts. Critical literacy is an emancipatory endeavor, supporting students to ask regular questions about representation, benefit, marginalization, and interests . . . a broad epistemic framework . . . a critique of dominance, a commitment to emancipation, and the use of critique and reflection as a means to empowerment. (pp. 123–124)

This definition calls on students and teachers to recognize dominant structures and systems, and to ask the important questions of "why?" and "how?" Why are some views and some voices heard while others are not? How do authors perpetuate stereotypes? How does the establishment become established in the first place? These questions call on students to question their own labels as well. What makes a student "at-risk"? What makes someone a minority? How do students support or fight against the dominant culture in their own choices of what to read and what to write?

All teachers make choices about how classroom time is spent and what knowledge is privileged. Within critical classrooms, these choices work to empower students. Teachers work with students to deconstruct the world and words around them while constructing words and worlds of their own (Shor, 1999; Freire & Macedo, 1987). This "new literacy," as Finn calls it, is heir to the tradition of progressive

education; it espouses literacy in which the control and the learning shifts from the teacher to the student (Finn, 2009, p. 35). It includes conversations about power and justice, and calls on students to become agents for change (Harste, 2000; Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999). While Finn terms it "new," there is nothing new about these ideas. Educators since Dewey (1916) have sought to engage children in education that creates critical thinkers and citizens who will challenge inequity. However, these theoretical ideals are unrealized in many of our classrooms.

Perhaps this lack of implementation is due to the inability to turn critical literacy into a program or scripted curriculum. Critical literacy is often described as "theory with implications for practice rather than a distinctive instructional methodology" (Behrmann, 2006, p. 490). Creating a "critical literacy" classroom is more complex than reading a certain text or following a specific "critical" scope and sequence map. However, there are identifiable characteristics of classrooms working within a critical framework. In these classrooms, teachers "carefully design literacy experiences that both encourage critical examination of texts and foster personal and emotional connections" while students "engage in critical conversations about texts where they question who and what is depicted and how that reflects societal norms and values" (Wood & Jocius, 2013, pp. 664–665). Ideally, such classrooms would feature collaboration between teachers and students in order to foster students' understanding of "how texts work, what texts intend to do to the world, and how social relations can be critiqued and reconstructed" (Behrmann, 2006, p. 491).

There are also instructional strategies that support a framework of critical literacy, such as "reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, producing counter-texts, conducting student-choice research projects, and taking social action" (Behrmann, 2006, p. 492). More specifically, these strategies involve "identifying multiple voices in texts, dominant cultural discourses, multiple possible readings of texts, and sources of authority where texts are used" (p. 491).

It is important to note, however, that there are significant barriers for creating a classroom with a critical mindset. Power struggles between students and the traditional teacher-dominant structure can fight against the needed student-led discourse and inquiry. Pressure from administrators, district policy, and mandated curricula or standards can hinder a teacher's ability to empower students with critical literacy (Beck, 2005). In light of widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards, many teachers are left wondering if there is room in the Standards for critical literacy.

Critical Literacy and the CCSS

Many who are skeptical of the new Standards see them as a threat to critical literacy. In 2000, Luke asked, "Is critical literacy in a state-based educational system an oxymoron?" (p. 449). As the Common Core State Standards rolled out across the nation, Gangi and Reilly returned to this essential question (2013). They argued that by "privileging efferent reading and marginalizing aesthetic reading," the CCSS do not support critical literacy (Gangi & Reilly, 2013, p. 10). However, I believe the CCSS and critical literacy are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The new CCSS demand that students do more complex analysis than they have done before but do not offer direction on instruction itself. So, though some may see the Standards as confining, one could choose to view them as granting permission to be flexible and creative. Rather than read from a textbook or specific set of classroom novels, the Standards can serve as justification for offering students a voice in selecting texts they care about. While preliminary documents by the authors of the CCSS signaled that teachers should not discuss student background knowledge when analyzing text, the authors revised and clarified their position in the *Revised Publisher's Criteria for the Common Core State Standards*

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in English Language Arts and Literacy, Grades 3–12 (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012).

The *Revised Publisher's Criteria* (2012) notes that there must be a shift in the focus of literacy instruction "to center on careful examination of the text itself" (p. 1) rather than on extensive scaffolding, pre-reading, or front-loading student knowledge. This shift does not mean that teachers cannot choose texts and tasks that connect with students' schema, or that teachers cannot grant students choice in selecting texts to analyze. It also does not mean that teachers cannot teach students to acknowledge

the lens through which they view text and the world. When students draw on their backgrounds to bring meaning to texts, they begin to understand how their lens colors everything they read.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard 1 states that students must be able to "*Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.*" Teachers are not tied to specific texts in order to meet this standard; the primary qualification for text is that it is sufficiently

FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS

By far, the most engaging advocacy topic for my students was the issue of child labor, both domestic and international. If your students are similarly intrigued and outraged, here are a few resources to help you and your students learn more:

- International Labour Organization

  http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/lang—en/index.htm

  This website offers an international look at youth employment and child labor. Contains useful statistics and facts.

- Fair Labor and Standards Act

  http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/youthlabor/

  Learn more about the federal law that governs child labor in the United States today.

- GovTrack Congressional Bills

  http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/subjects/youth_employment_and_child_labor/6252?congress=112

  Track current bills in the US Congress regarding child labor.

- Child Labor Coalition: Stop Child Labor webpage (2012)

  www.stopchildlabor.org

  A website with current news about child labor, both in the United States and abroad.

- UNICEF:

  http://www.unicef.org/

  A website detailing with UNICEF's work around the world to support the health and well-being of all children.

- *Scholastic Scope,* September 3, 2012 issue

  "A Child Slave in California," Kristin Lewis

  This is a narrative nonfiction piece about a modern domestic slave in California who became a citizen last year. There are great resources online that supplement this text, including a video of the woman's citizenship ceremony.

- *Iqbal Masih and the Crusaders against Child Slavery,* Susan Kuklin (1998)

  This book tells the story of Iqbal Masih, a child laborer in Pakistan's rug-making industry. He became an activist and traveled the world fighting for the rights of children. He was assassinated in 1995.

complex. Specifically, the *Publisher's Criteria* calls for reading materials to "acknowledge the range of students' interests" and that "high-quality newspaper and magazine articles as well as information-rich websites" can be used to meet standards of text complexity (2012, p. 4).

Freire and Macedo (1987), along with Vasquez (2010), note that with critical literacy, students read the world in addition to reading the word. When students read closely (Standard 1), analyze a text (Standard 1), analyze an author's word choice (Standard 4), and determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text (Standard 6), they acknowledge that these words, choices, and positions are not neutral. When critical literacy is a "way of being" (Vasquez, 2010) in a classroom, these Standards allow students to read the world. The Standards do not demand a teaching framework of critical literacy, nor do they prohibit one. Rather, they are an opportunity for teachers to explore how literacy can engage and empower students.

School Context

I teach seventh grade in a large urban public middle school in a mid-sized Southern city. The school, located in the 13th poorest zip code in the country (King, 2012), serves a diverse group of students. In the course of a day, I teach 120 students. Some carry the "Gifted and Talented" label and read at a tenth-grade level; others are labeled "Special Education" and read at a second-grade level. Both groups reflect diversity in race, religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Starting with Student Engagement

Early in the school year, students read a piece from the textbook on child labor. They quickly engaged with the text, asking question after question. Students couldn't believe that child labor abuses were occurring in our modern world. One student argued over the facts of the text. "But there are laws!" she kept insisting. "That's not legal. They can't do that!" Other students went on the offensive, describing all the things they would do to get themselves out of such a situation. These ranged from "I'd call the cops, I don't care what they'd do to me" to "just try

to make me a slave—I'll bust your head in!" As I spent the day discussing the kinds of systems in society that allow for child labor to exist, I knew this was a topic that would lend itself to in-depth study.

We went on to read *Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade against Child Labor* by Russell Freedman (1994) to learn about the history of child labor in our country, followed by a look at current child labor laws in the United States. Students brought up their own experiences of work—helping out around the house, babysitting, taking odd jobs to help bring in extra money. Then we read newspaper articles about child labor around the world and watched videos about Craig Kielburger to learn about his organization Free the Children (2012). To provide a balanced view of the issue, we also read articles from *The Week* (2008) and the website TriplePundit (CCA LivE, 2010) that looked at the potential benefits of child labor.

With every piece, students analyzed the text, asking why the author made the choices he or she did. We looked at the author's point of view and provided textual evidence to back up ideas. The most important factor is, we did it happily. The students were unaware that they were practicing Reading Standard 1, *"Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text,"* and Reading Informational Text Standard 6, *"Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author distinguishes his or her position from that of others."* Even so, with every text they became more adept at the close reading required by the CCSS.

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As we learned about Iqbal Masih, the Pakistani boy assassinated in 1995 for fighting against child slavery, students couldn't believe that someone their age had made such an impact on the world. Impressed by his example, we discussed and read about other teens making a difference. The students

particularly enjoyed reading articles from *Scholastic Scope* magazine that highlighted teenagers influencing society. These readings helped establish a critical framework in my classroom, as students questioned their own place in the world and appreciated the power of text to affect change (Vasquez, 2010).

Buoyed by the child labor mini-unit, I decided to frame the next few months around this focus on injustice that had taken root in my classroom. Outrage, or any heightened emotion, leads to engagement, and student engagement is a significant predictor of achievement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). By feeding students' sense of injustice, engagement remained high; this was the perfect setting for my students to master many of the complex new Standards.

Understanding Our Lens

Before looking outward, students needed to look inward. At an age when adolescents are trying on a different identity every day, this was an opportunity for self-reflection. We talked about the values that are deeply ingrained in a person, even at age 12. I also wanted to reinforce the idea that they had valuable ideas and beliefs. Essential to critical literacy is the idea that the lens we bring to a text or situation—the "past experiences and understanding about how the world works"—affects how we read that text (Vasquez, 2010, p. 3; DeVoogd & McLaughlin, 2004).

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Before we could engage in "powerful literacy," therefore, students needed to examine the lens they use to see their world. To explore this idea, we spent some time with the "This I Believe" project (2012). Made famous by Edward R. Murrow in the 1950s and revived in 2004, this collection of personal essays by real, regular people (many of them students) resonated with my students. We read a few essays together as a class and spent time exploring the website. There are over 100,000 essays on the website, so every student could find an essay that resonated with him or her.

We spent time in writing workshop composing our own essays. The website accepts student submissions, creating an authentic place for students to publish their writing. As students distilled their beliefs and revised their essays for possible submission, they identified their unique perspectives and experienced how creating a text allowed them to situate themselves within a broader community (in this case, the "This I Believe" community) (Heffernan & Lewison, 2009; Vasquez, 2010). Once students felt confident about who they were, it was time to push them to look outside of themselves.

The Advocacy Project

Throughout our inquiry into child labor, we discussed the concept of advocacy—what it means, what it looks like, how it works. We began a unit of study called "The Advocacy Project" with the famous clip from the movie *Network* (Gottfried & Lumet, 1976) in which the newscaster Howard Beale has a breakdown during the nightly news and yells to the national audience that it's time to demand change. He starts yelling a chorus of, "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" My students and I discussed how and when anger can be useful for affecting change. We returned to the "This I Believe" website and found essays by people who used what they believe as the impetus to help their communities. We also returned to students' own "This I Believe" essays to see what seeds of change were embedded there, and reflected back to the teenagers we read about who were affecting change in their communities. We spent a day creating a list of things at the school, local, and national levels that students were mad about, things that needed changing.

The list was long and varied. Not everything that made students mad was an "injustice." Some ideas were "petty," as my students called them, while others highlighted bigger societal issues. One example of this was the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables available to students in their neighborhood. As Sarah (all student names are pseudonyms) said, "All that [the corner store] has are chips and junk food. I like it, but I know it's not that good for me or for my little brother. But where is my mom supposed to get

that stuff? It's not like she has a car." This prompted a conversation about what makes something an "injustice." We decided that for our purposes, an injustice was any time a system (or "the man" as one student insisted on calling it) was in place that made things unfair to a group of people.

As the list grew, it prompted discussion of issues that never would have occurred to me to discuss. Many students had no idea that land mines existed—but after seeing a student add it to the list, they wanted to learn about the issue. Other students didn't understand why "the city closing bus stops" was a problem. Most of these students came from families with at least one car, and they were shocked that a lack of transportation could affect someone's life so profoundly. As Foss (2002) and Sleeter (1995) asserted, critical literacy is not only for students who fit stereotypical models of marginalization. All students need to understand the power of literacy and how to use literacy to affect change.

Each student then selected a topic. This was a topic about which the student felt particularly passionate or about which he or she wanted to learn more. Most students selected topics from the brainstormed group list, although a few chose topics they thought of after our group list was created. Topics were as diverse as the students themselves. Examples include food deserts in the community, implementation of Title IX laws, support for victims of domestic violence, the constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, gun control, inexpensive clothing made possible through sweat shops, illegal drug laws and treatment, and paths to citizenship for undocumented workers.

Students had wide latitude when choosing issues, although there were a few requirements. Topics needed to be something they had personal experience with, and something that could be researched objectively, which for our purposes meant that students could find evidence to support more than one point of view for the topic. We spent a considerable amount of time discussing the concepts of objectivity, accuracy, and bias. We discussed the lens that each student brings to each text as a reader, and how the very choices students made when selecting texts show subjectivity (Vasquez, 2010). These ideas are all essential to critical literacy, for citizens must be able to assess the legitimacy of what they are being told (DeVoogd & McLaughlin, 2004; Friere, 1970). Students need to understand that "all texts are created by someone, somewhere, for some reason" and that critical readers search to find that reason (Vasquez, 2010, p. 3). These critical, almost skeptical, approaches to text also fit perfectly with Reading Informational Text Standard 8, *"Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient to support the claims."*

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I assigned students four major tasks as part of The Advocacy Project, each with a specific timeline and rubric. Task 1 was to investigate their topic, finding multiple perspectives. To accomplish this task, students used a class set of laptop computers and took copious notes on their findings to share at the end of each day. As students began their research, they assessed the validity and accuracy of each source. This required students to recognize that texts are "never neutral" and to assess how the author was attempting to frame the reader's thinking (Vasquez, 2010, p. 3). We decided that "sketchy" sources could still be used if they were identified as such and as long as the views of credible and accurate sources were clearly discussed. We discussed why Wikipedia, on its own, does not qualify as a "credible and accurate source," but the links within it can be. This led to a discussion on citation—why it's important and how to do it correctly. Students saw how two websites or two authors can come at a topic from different perspectives.

Particularly useful at this stage were sets of essays found on *The New York Times*'s website (*The New York Times,* 2012). These sets provided short essays from a variety of sources on a single topic. We used these sets as models, comparing how different authors presented information and also noting how the discourse provided by commentary on the website affected the authors' ideas of "truth"

(Vasquez, 2010). Some students' topics were represented in these sets; these students were able to use the essays in their research. Other students used the sets as models as they sought out their own sources. Diving into their research, they were often frustrated by my requirement that they provide multiple perspectives to their issue; many of them had already decided what was right and what was wrong. The difference between argument and persuasion is supported by Appendix A of the CCSS:

This level of engagement also helped students who are struggling readers. Cognitive strategies work best when students are motivated by texts that appeal to them.

> When teachers ask students to consider two or more perspectives on a topic or issue . . . students must think critically and deeply, assess the validity of their own thinking, and anticipate counterclaims in opposition to their own assertions. (p. 24)

The emphasis for this project was on research—informational reading, writing, and thinking. Only after one understands the research can one analyze it and make a well-informed opinion. Considerable class time was dedicated to the research process.

A significant benefit of this time in the unit was that it met so many Standards (see Figure 1) organically. Each lesson is focused around a learning target—the one key thing students should know and be able to do by the end of class. In the past, I've created learning targets and lesson plans around what was "next" in the curriculum. This time, however, the project guided the focus of each day's lesson. Students might struggle one day, which determined the learning target for the next day. Over the course of the project, each of the intended learning targets had evolved naturally as part of the authentic learning experience. For my students, it seemed natural that we talked about search terms and taking quotes from sources; these were things they needed to know to make their research easier.

The Power of Student Choice

A key factor in the unit's success was student self-selection. Choice increases motivation and student engagement (Walker, 2003). Within the noted parameters, students had free range to select (and change) their own topic. Students who had struggled all year to stay on task were completely absorbed in their research. When asked later what the best part of the project was, students discussed this element again and again. Michael, a student repeating the seventh grade, said it was important that "I had a topic I wanted to research and not a boring topic." According to Tyler, a student reading significantly below grade level, "It made it easier to do research because I got to do what I know about and things like that." Kayla, a student who often has trouble focusing when she reads, said she liked picking her own topic because she already knew something about it. "We didn't have to find stuff that we had no idea about. Like we used stuff that we already know about kind of; if we didn't pick [the topic] ourselves, we might not have known nothing about it."

One source of concern when planning a project of this nature was students' ability to stay on task while online, but this concern was unwarranted. In the two weeks students spent reading, gathering, and quoting research, only one student needed to be redirected to a task-appropriate website. Considering past difficulties getting reluctant readers to stay on task, this was a victory. This level of engagement also helped students who are struggling readers. Cognitive strategies work best when students are motivated by texts that appeal to them (Taboada, Tonks, Wigfield, & Guthrie, 2009), and this was evident in this project. When students got caught up in an article or website that was too complex for them, they were much more likely to monitor their understanding and ask for help than if we had been reading a text together as a class. They were also earnest in using fix-up strategies (Tovani, 2000) because they were reading these texts for their own purposes.

"Expert" Presentations

After each student became an "expert" in his or her area of research, he or she created a PowerPoint presentation of findings and presented it to the class. The writing and creation of the PowerPoint was Task 2 of the Project; the presentation was Task 3. The students poured themselves into these tasks. One

	This I Believe Essays	Research	PowerPoints	Presentations	Argument Essays
R.1: Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what text says explicitly and implicitly.	X	X			X
R.2: Determine central idea or theme of a text and its development.	X	X			
RI.6: Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how that point of view differs from that of others.	X	X			
RI.8: Trace and evaluate an argument.		X			
RI.9: Analyze how two or more authors writing on the same topic shape their presentations.		X			
W.1: Write arguments to support claims.					X
W.2: Write informative/explanatory texts.			X		
W.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences.	X				
W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing.	X		X		X
W.5: Develop and strengthen writing through use of the writing process.	X				X
W.6: Use technology to produce and publish writing.	X	X	X		X
W.7: Conduct short research projects.		X	X		
W.8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources.		X			
W.9: Draw evidence from texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.	X	X			
SL.4: Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points.				X	
SL.5: Include multimedia components and visual displays in presentations.			X	X	
SL.6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks.				X	

Figure 1. Relationship between 7th-grade CCSS and Advocacy Project activities.

student, Marcus, had to be reprimanded for skipping his Social Studies class to go to the library to work on his advocacy PowerPoint. Marcus was a student who had a history of non-engagement, so this buy-in was significant. Another student, Michael, said of the project, "I loved it. I love talking and being on the computer. I loved presenting it to my friends and personally I found things I didn't know about my topic."

Again, the Standards in this part of the unit fit naturally. We focused on Writing Standard 2 for seventh grade, *"Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content."* The skills required by the Standard were concepts that the

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students needed to know to be successful: how to organize information, how to use quotes and sources to support ideas, how to establish an appropriate style and tone, etc. The fact that these were presentations and not articles or other "traditional" formats did not hinder their ability to address the Standard. The Standard calls for sophisticated informational writing and communication, and that was the essence of their work.

The presentations also supported the critical literacy framework of the classroom (student use of multimedia to create authentic communication is one of Vasquez's key tenets of critical literacy [Vasquez, 2010]) and Writing Standard 6 for seventh grade, *"Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and link to and cite sources as well as to interact and collaborate with others, including linking to and citing sources."*

Students met many of the speaking and listening Standards when they presented their findings

NOW ACT!

Your students can become advocates for the issues that matter to them. Once they have identified their passions, help them take action by providing guidance and resources they can use. Here are a few ideas for how to get started:

- Contact your mayor's office or city council member. Most local governments have opportunities for youth to get involved in the civic life of their communities. The office of the mayor can help you find resources for almost anything that involves public policy (helping the homeless, planting trees, recycling, learning about the election process, etc).
- Partner with your local chapter of the American Red Cross to learn about emergency preparedness, disaster relief, and safety/first aid. The Red Cross will also coordinate with you if you want to start an extracurricular club to create student-led service projects.
- Many places of worship are active in community outreach and are familiar with the needs of the citizens in their neighborhoods. They can be a wonderful resource to point you in the direction of people and organizations most in need of support. Faith-based schools can also partner directly with a place of worship to create a religious foundation for their service.
- Work with the local police and fire stations in your school's neighborhood to increase student service and involvement. Police officers and fire fighters are often eager to share their work with youth, and jump at the chance to work directly with students to make their community safer.
- Use the Internet to find nonprofit organizations active in your area. Here are a few websites that serve as clearinghouses for nonprofits across the nation:
  - www.handsonnetwork.org
  - www.allforgood.org
  - www.idealist.org

to their peers (see Figure 1). With few exceptions, they were eager to present and extremely respectful of each other. This was an empowering experience for the students. After the presentations were over, Amanda said, "At first I wasn't going to [present], but when I got up there I did great." While students often compete with each other or act out to mask feelings of inadequacy, this was an opportunity for everyone to succeed. Greg, a student with frequent behavior issues, said that he enjoyed the presentations because "when I presented I had everyone's respect." This was an invaluable exercise in building community.

Argument Writing

Only after the presentations did we move on to Task 4. In this task, students were allowed to "take a stand" and pick one side of their issue to support. I challenged them to synthesize everything they had learned into an essay. We looked at a variety of student models of argument essays and discussed the characteristics of an effective argument. We spent time in writing workshop, discussing how to transform informational writing into an essay advocating a particular position. During this time, we worked on developing thesis statements and providing sufficient data to support the thesis. Students also worked on various leads and conclusions, revising to determine which ones created the best argument.

Since much of the brainstorming, research, and "thinking" of the essays had already occurred with the informational PowerPoints, students found the writing process surprisingly painless. As Finn noted, powerful literacy has a natural partner in writing workshop (2009, p. 215). "When it came time to write," Michael said, "I actually knew what I was talking about in my essay." After revision, students had an essay that hit three major writing Standards (see Figure 1).

Literary Connections

This unit lent itself to informational reading and writing, but literary work was an important component of instruction. Students were constantly doing their own reading and writing, both literary and informational in nature. As their independent

reading is always self-selected, it was fascinating to see how our work in The Advocacy Project influenced their literary choices (see Figure 2). More and more novels of revolution and independence were passed around during reading workshop, and themes of courage, perseverance, and hope repeatedly showed up in literary analysis.

Lessons Learned

When I read *Kids at Work* back in September, I had no idea I would still be working on this project in April. As most good things, however, this "unit" took on a life of its own. I found myself giving more and more time to it, not wanting to rush the process or my students. In the end, I believe it was worth it. As with any first-time effort, there were problems along the way. While The Advocacy Project helped me successfully implement the CCSS, it was not without challenges.

The truth is, I needed to embrace change, leaving the comfort of old lessons and curricula behind. I had to accept the queasiness I hadn't felt in a decade in the classroom. It has been a while

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Popular Reading Workshop Selections

Fiction:

- *Lyddie,* Katherine Paterson (1994)
- *Counting on Grace,* Elizabeth Winthrop (2007)
- *The Bomb,* Theodore Taylor (2007)
- *Hope was Here,* Joan Bauer (2005)
- *Slick,* Sara Cassidy (2010)
- *Rooftop,* Paul Volponi (2006)
- *The Latte Rebellion,* Sarah Jamila Stevenson (2011)
- *The Hunger Games,* Suzanne Collins (2008)
- *Nothing but the Truth,* Avi (1992)

Nonfiction:

- *Iqbal,* Francesco D'Adamo and Ann Leonori (2005)
- *Nickel and Dimed,* Barbara Ehrenreich (2001)
- *Fast Food Nation,* Eric Schlosser (2005)
- *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier,* Ishmael Beah (2008)

Figure 2. Popular reading workshop selections

since I have felt out of my element or unsure of my teaching. I needed the courage of my convictions; I refused to allow the adoption of new Standards to turn my language arts class into a test-preparation course.

Technology was the biggest practical barrier to student success. I am fortunate to have access to a class set of laptop computers for student use, but they are slow and unreliable. Students often spent large amounts of class time waiting to log on to the computer or waiting for the wireless signal. For students who have computer and Internet access at home, this was an inconvenience. For students who do not have such opportunities at home, this was a significant stumbling block. I often stayed after school to give students extra time on the computers. I also enlisted the librarian and youth services coordinator to help students find Internet access.

Another element of the unit I underestimated was the time required for the presentation phase. For many students, this project was the first time they had ever been asked to speak formally in front of their peers. After the first few presentations, I stopped the class and explicitly taught the basic elements of public speaking. I had not anticipated these lessons, and the days they took added pressure as the state standardized test loomed. Their new skills eventually became a source of pride for the students, so the time spent was worthwhile. I am hopeful, though, that with new CCSS Speaking and Listening Standards in place, my future students will have some experience with presenting before they reach the seventh grade.

> *I needed to embrace change, leaving the comfort of old lessons and curricula behind. I had to accept the queasiness I hadn't felt in a decade in the classroom.*

Support Systems

As teachers across the country embark on the task of implementing the CCSS, it is important to recognize the systems that enable teacher and student success. My path to implementation began with intense learning and reflection. Before I could teach my students to master the Standards, I had to internalize them, to know them so intimately that they seemed to integrate themselves into my work.

This process also required support and time. Monthly meetings with the state network gave me a place to wrestle with the Standards, hash out language and meaning with my peers, and vent my frustrations. I am grateful to have been given the space in which to do that, and grateful that this work was supported financially by my state and my district. The knowledge of the Standards gained from my network meetings allowed me to look for ways to incorporate them into a framework of critical literacy; without this comfort level, I likely would not have been willing to take on The Advocacy Project with my students. Teachers without such an opportunity will need to find ways to carve out time for study from their already busy schedules. As more districts and schools move to a model of Professional Learning Communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), teachers should advocate for ownership of PLC meetings as a space in which to study the Standards and the integration of critical pedagogy into new curricula.

Encouragement at both the school and university levels was also essential. My principal wholly supported my struggles and experimentation, giving me the freedom to try new ideas without fear of reprimands for veering off of curriculum guides and pacing maps. My teammates were willing to be patient and supported me in the face of student challenges. My colleagues and advisors at the university encouraged my work in the classroom and supported me with additional resources.

Student Success

By the time my students opened their state test booklets, I felt confident about their mastery of the content. They read and analyzed complex texts. Most students provided textual evidence with every answer without prompting. They looked with a critical eye at argument and searched for credibility and accuracy. "Says who?" and "why?" became common refrains in my classroom. While reading a text days before the test, Jessica raised her hand and said, "This lady don't know nothing about teenagers, but she act like she do. Why we gotta believe

her? Just cause she wrote this?" I laughed, and told her she made a valid argument. Comments like this made throughout the year indicated that my students had internalized the essential elements of critical literacy. They understood that words and texts had power. They questioned that power, and wanted to use it for themselves.

Kincheloe (2008) claimed that critical literacy should "engage the impassioned spirit of students in ways that moves [sic] them to learn what they don't know and to identify what they want to know" (p. 20). This was evident throughout The Advocacy Project, as students continually looked for more information and sought new perspectives on the issues important in their lives.

Finn's powerful literacy and Vasquez's tenets had taken root in my classroom, and students were empowered to act (Finn, 2009; Vasquez, 2010). As a result of The Advocacy Project, three boys, all below grade-level readers and writers, wrote a proposal and secured peer signatures on a petition to start a school chapter of Free the Children. One girl made plans to start a service-learning project next year based on wounded veterans, the topic of her Advocacy Project. These students used their literacy to effect change; they are what Finn called "students who agitate" (2009, p. 217).

The students also grew in ways not directly connected to text. They were more comfortable speaking in front of their peers and listening respectfully in return than they had been in August. In the end, the Common Core State Standards were not confining; rather, the Standards represented specific (and complex) goals to meet, regardless of method. While I wish this unit were a panacea for struggling readers, I still have students below grade level. These students will continue to need intervention and strategic instruction. However, the increased agency, engagement, and self-efficacy of students, brought about by a framework of critical literacy, increased achievement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Pajares, 1996, McDonald & Thornley, 2009).

These students used their literacy to effect change; they are what Finn called "students who agitate."

INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

Teaching for Social Justice

The students in the article did a deep dive into child labor as part of their inquiry and advocacy unit. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan *Giving Voice to Child Laborers Through Monologues* invites students to present monologues in the "voice" of someone involved in child labor in England, respond to questions, and then discuss contemporary child laborers and compare them to those from the past.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/giving-voice-child-laborers-289.html

Students can also learn more about labor activist Cesar Chavez in the lesson plan *Writing Free Verse in the "Voice" of Cesar Chavez.* This lesson gives students the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the characteristics of free verse and to write a free-verse poem using written material about Chavez. First, students read about experiences that helped shape the life of Chavez and then take descriptive notes about these experiences. Using these notes, each student composes a first draft of a free verse poem in the "voice" of Chavez. With the help of graphic organizers and a rubric, they revise, polish, and share their poems with their classmates.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/writing-free-verse-voice-777.html

In *Sí, Se Puede: Making a Difference, One Letter at a Time* students learn about labor unions, strikes, and organizing for change after reading the book *¡Si, Se Puede!/Yes, We Can!: Janitor Strike in L.A.* Students interview staff members in their school to learn about their daily work life, and write persuasive advocacy letters.

www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/puede-making-difference-letter-30682.html

Looking Forward

The Advocacy Project is not the only way to teach the new Standards in a liberating way; any source of passion for teachers and students can be effective. This is the moment to reject "piece-based" units. No longer can we look at our lesson plans and say, "We're writing memoirs now, because that's what comes next in the pacing guide or textbook." Teachers need to adopt the best-practice of inquiry-based units: the horrors of the Holocaust, environmental education, the challenges of democracy, the search for identity . . . the possibilities are extensive. Jim Burke's 2010 book *What's the Big Idea?: Question-Driven Units to Motivate Reading, Writing, and Thinking* is a great resource for this work. The key to success is an intimate knowledge of the Standards, rather than a fear of them.

The Advocacy Project is not the only way to teach the new Standards in a liberating way; any source of passion for teachers and students can be effective.

Each time standards, curricula, or guidelines are published, whether from national, state, or local administration, teachers must make professional choices about how to help their students succeed. On their own, standards will not ensure quality education for each student. It is possible to give poor instruction within the framework of the CCSS, as it is with any set of standards. However, it is also possible to deliver effective instruction that empowers and engages students.

The best aspect of these new Standards is also the most terrifying: while the Standards dictate what students must be able to do, they do not specify how to get them there. It is tiring and difficult work to create effective, critical lessons that help students master the Standards. Once the anxiety and suspicion subside, however, I hope my colleagues around the country are able to accept the challenge and embrace the possibility these Standards hold. Our profession, and our students, will be better for it.

Epilogue

As I write this, our state, district, and school test scores are being released to the papers. These test scores are part of the new state accountability system, and are meant to measure student mastery of the new Standards. Because common assessments such as those coming from the PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia will not be ready for use until the 2014–2015 school year (Keany, 2013), the state contracted Pearson to create a new standardized assessment, the K-PREP. As noted on the Kentucky Department of Education website (2012), "The K-PREP assessment is a blended model of a Criterion-Referenced Test (CRT) and a Norm-Referenced Test (NRT) containing multiple-choice and constructed-response items." Pearson was tasked with aligning the test to the CCSS, and there is the potential for revision and refinement of the K-PREP as the test is analyzed and as PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments are published.

Sixty-four percent of my students scored at the Proficient or Distinguished level, compared with 38% in the district and 47% in the state. This indicates that according to the K-PREP test, 64% of my students demonstrated mastery of the seventh-grade reading Standards.

There is certainly much more work to be done, but there is evidence that test scores and best practice are not mutually exclusive. It is possible for students simultaneously to master the Standards and engage in empowering, critical literacy.

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