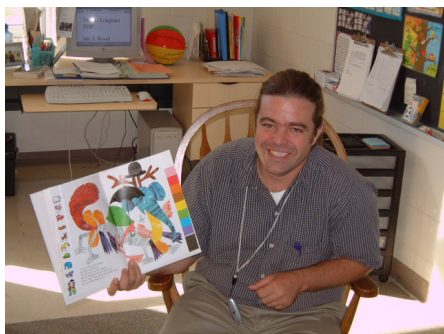


In this article, Jeffrey Wood reflects on his teacher research project in his kindergarten classroom. Wood focuses on the value of critical literacy as seen through his work with Moses, a student in his classroom. At this time of increasing language and literacy standards and testing in early childhood education, Wood's literacy project reminds us that wonderful literacy teaching is really about matching our teaching with the particular talents and needs of our children. Through a sensitive look at the literacy learning of one child, Moses, Wood shows us how much we need to consider children's points of views in early childhood literacy teaching. Wood describes how an important idea such as critical literacy—which involves creating literacy teaching that speaks to children's identities and empowers them—brings us closer to the worlds of our children and to those moments of insight and learning for ourselves as teachers.

— Daniel Meier
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Mr. Wood reading

Moses's Story

Critical Literacy and Social Justice in an Urban Kindergarten

Jeffrey W. Wood

Taken from field notes, beginning of November . . .

Moses sits in the book center staring at the wall for the third day in a row.

"Moses, it is time to get a book and start reading," I tell him during our quiet reading time and go to help another student. When I return he is still sitting staring at a blank spot on the wall.

I call him aside, "Why aren't you reading?"

"I can't read," he replies.

"Of course you can read, I have seen you read. You have read to me," I say to Moses, believing he is having an issue around confidence.

"I can't read!" Moses says again, the anger clearly beginning to well up from within.

"Why don't you look at a book?" I say, trying vainly to defuse the situation.

"I tell you I can't read!"

At this point I decide that my best approach is to think about this some more and leave Moses alone.

"Let's talk about this some more later," I say. Moses sits down staring blankly at the wall, now with an angry scowl on his face.

I knew Moses could read. I had observed him reading the titles of unfamiliar books, reading to his peers, and he would often jump in and read the text of a book I was

reading to the class. Was he telling me at this point he didn't want to read *my* books? I reflected on this incident and the next day when Moses was sitting and staring at the wall again I called him over.

"Moses, it's time to read. You should be reading a book."

"I can't read," came the now-familiar mantra.

I handed him *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats and asked him if he had read it.

"I can't read."

I opened the book and started flipping through it. "Why don't you have a look at it?"

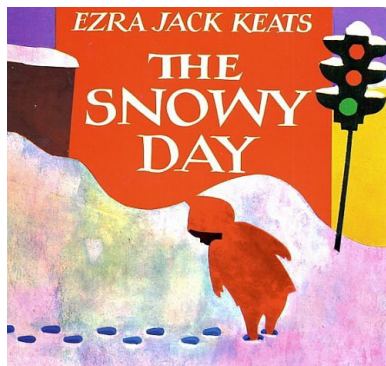
"Okay." Moses immediately took the book and read it voraciously over and over again and when it was time to put away our books he hid the book under the bookshelf. The next day when we came back into the class he found the spot where he had left *The Snowy Day* and started reading it again.

I had realized the evening before that all the books that I had read to the class to that point in the school year had either used White children or animals as main characters. There were several books in the class that had Black characters but we had not read them yet (I was waiting for the first snow of the year to read *The Snowy Day*.) Had Moses decided that the books the class had read so far didn't represent him and so he wasn't going to read them? This question came to me as I wrote in my reflection journal that night.

Even the possibility that this was the case was significant for me because I was conducting teacher research to help me understand how I could use critical literacy as a teaching framework. This incident showed me how far my practice was from what I believed and was trying to achieve. While having books in the classroom that represented minority characters is only a small part of critical literacy, this incident demonstrated for me the complexity involved in trying to use a critical literacies framework in the classroom. But this was only the beginning of my learning from Moses.

Traditionally, students from low-income backgrounds have been immersed in narrowly defined school-based literacy to compensate for the "disadvantage" that many of them are assumed to have experienced at home. This approach ignores all the literacies children already use outside of school (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines 1996; Taylor 1997). How things are done and valued at home is often very different from how they are valued at school. Literacy is not just about learning how to read and write; it is as much a cultural practice as a functional one. Critical literacy is a perspective and way of thinking about curriculum, literacies, and the lived experiences of our students.

The literacy instruction I offer in my classroom has been moving toward critical literacy practice (see Luke & Freebody 1997; Vasquez 2004). The students have engaged in discussions and conversations about books that treat the discourse of school as arbitrary and that value the language and literacies children use, not only reflecting the students' lived experiences, but validating them. These critical conversations cross lines of culture, gender, race, and class. The book discussions were intended both to engage the lived experiences of the students as meaningful, and at the same time help the children to examine critically the texts we read *and* the world around us. These discussions were then intended to lead to acts of social justice, effecting change in the lives of my students. It was my hope that this would lead to an interest in literacy from my students and a desire to use literacies in meaningful ways. It was also my hope that not only would this type of instruction yield stronger readers, but stronger citizens as well.



Critical literacy is a perspective and way of thinking about curriculum, literacies, and the lived experiences of our students.

About my research question and design

My students are constantly teaching me about themselves and my teaching; they **challenge my beliefs** and show me new ways to think about learning and literacies.

Although I usually let my research question emerge from the children, I began the year with the intention of doing teacher research on critical literacy. I wanted to better understand how I could support my students' learning using critical literacy and how using a critical literacy approach could interest my students in taking social justice actions. I approached this research study as action research, taking the stance of an involved participant (Bissex & Bullock 1987; Eisner 1991). As the teacher in the classroom, I am actively engaging and challenging my students in literacy practices as well as actively challenging and analyzing my own practice and beliefs. My students are constantly teaching me about themselves and my teaching; they challenge my beliefs and show me new ways to think about learning and literacies. My role is twofold: that of researcher and of participant (Carspecken 1996).

My life as a teacher is intertwined in the lives of my students (Britzman 1997). I am biased, for it is difficult to be truly critical of one's own practice and the development of one's own students. I think my students are amazing and I want to believe they are all exceptional. I also want to believe that the learning environment is the best that I can offer. Neither of these assumptions is likely fully accurate, and they may prevent me from exploring my beliefs about best teaching practices, multiculturalism, diversity, and literacy. What is important for me, as a teacher researcher, is to be aware of bias and to constantly question assumptions. My research questions for this study were:

What types of conversations are initiated when one views literacy critically and uses critical literacy texts within the classroom? How can we sustain critical conversations that arise from the use of a critical literacy approach in the classroom? How can we sustain students' literacies in the classroom? How can kindergarten students engage in acts of social justice?

About critical literacy

In critical literacy the social world of students is the context for literacy instruction and learning (Vasquez 2004). As such it deals with key issues in children's lives that allow them to see literacy as empowering. Literacy is more than reading and writing; it is inherently social, cultural, and political.

Throughout this paper I rely on James Gee's definition of discourses. He defines a *discourse* as far more than the language used in a community; it is the sayings-doings-thinkings-feelings-valuings of any group within society. We engage with many discourses as we move between different groups. For example, we act, and are expected to act, very differently when we are at school then when we are at a party with friends.

Critical literacy aims at creating students who are *biliterate*. By this I mean students who are able to understand and communicate effectively in not only

their own primary or home discourse, but also in the other discourses that are used in their communities (Gee 1996, 2000). Schools typically engage in a discourse that is White, middle class, and represents the dominant discourse of society. This is not the discourse that many of our students use at home.

Critical literacy engages children in building literacies as social and language resources that are rooted in their lived experiences and home discourses. For



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my classroom, I have chosen texts that reflect the reality of my students' lives; some of the critical texts we read in class were *Something Beautiful*, by Sharon Dennis Wyeth; *Voices in the Park*, by Anthony Browne; *A Chair for My Mother*, by Vera B. Williams; and *December*, by Eve Bunting. This is not to say that all the texts we read dealt with critical issues but that anytime we read a book we looked at how it positioned us as readers and we examined the intent of the author. We use our book discussion times to act as a springboard for dialogue, helping the children to become conscious not only of how they act upon texts, but of how texts act upon them. Not only do we need to read books with our students, but the books we read need to deal with issues that affect the lives of our students in important ways (Leland et al. 1999).

“What a critical perspective offers teachers is a way to think about what it is students are learning to read and write, what they do with that reading and writing, and what that reading and writing does to them and their world” (Comber & Kalmer 1997, 31). Through this perspective, a space is created that allows the students to better connect classroom practice with the social realms they engage in outside of school. This process forges a connection between the home, school, and social realms that allows these realms to more closely resemble each other. Critical literacies practice engages students through the pragmatic cueing system (the social context surrounding the literate act), allowing the students to use their previous experiences and resulting in classroom literacies more closely mirroring the literacies children use outside of the classroom. This helps the literacies act as scaffolds for each other; this supports literacy learning across the child's discourses. Critical literacy is not only a type of pedagogy that is different from a more traditional approach, it is a different worldview that transforms teaching and the way we, students and teacher, see and interact with the world.

At the core of my critical literacies practice is the concept of a generative curriculum (Dyson 1993; Project Zero & Reggio Emilia 2001). This curriculum is one that is constructed by the students and the teacher together, and draws on the lived experiences of the students to drive the curriculum. Critical literacies practice looks at the needs in communities and provides an outlet, a source of action or social justice. Critical literacy does not end in discussion, therefore; critical literacies practice leads to action (Vasquez 2004). In this curriculum, there is an active working out of the students' learning and problem solving. By this I mean we act on, and don't just talk about, the issues that are important to the students. To do this, I use texts in the classroom to support critical



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Critical literacy is a different worldview that transforms teaching and the way we, students and teacher, see and interact with the world.

conversations that examine questions and problems that are embedded in the lived experiences of the students. For each text, we always ask: “Who is this text written for?” “Who benefits from the message of this text?” and “What would this story look like from another perspective?” Critical literacies practice is not something that is just done on Friday afternoon, after everything else is finished (Harste 1999); it is something that must permeate the curriculum as well as the teacher’s thinking and beliefs.



© Subjects & Predicates

About the participants

I am a White, male, kindergarten teacher at a small urban school in Ontario and had been teaching for five years at the time of this research. The student body of the school in which I teach is comprised of a diverse mix of race and socioeconomic status. Fifty-seven percent are English language learners and 50 percent are dealing with some aspect of poverty. The vast majority (72 percent) of my students come from backgrounds that are different from the mainstream either economically, culturally, or linguistically—from what Gee calls *subjugated discourses* (1996, 2000).

Methods: Data sources and data collection

My research data includes daily journal entries of reflections on my practice and classroom events (either audiotaped or written), written observations of events that related to the research, audiotapes of the students’ interactions with literacy, photographs of students engaging in literate practices, observations made by and discussions with my principal and colleagues, writing samples collected from students, and parent-teacher interactions. Each data source has its own inherent weaknesses, but collecting from a variety of sources allows me to address this difficulty, while at the same time allowing triangulation of data (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Combining multiple data sources allowed me to verify my emerging themes and increased my understanding of what was happening in my classroom.

I collected data on my class throughout the entire school year, from the first day until the last. I wrote in my journal after class daily about what happened that day—my impressions and feelings about what was going on in the class and basic logistical information and observations (“Today we . . .”). At times I wrote very little in my journal because of time constraints imposed by administrative duties—parent-teacher conferences, report cards, and so on—and other times I would write copious amounts multiple times a day. I almost always had a clipboard with me to take notes as interesting events unfolded. Immediately after a student had said or done something I felt could be important I would write it down, often taking a picture as well. I would go back to students and ask them if I understood something they had said, sometimes revising my notes in their presence. I also had a tape recorder and blank tapes in the class to record our whole class discussions and to do miscue analysis of the students’ reading.

I didn’t tape every class discussion, as listening to each 20- to 30-minute class meeting would have been too overwhelming a task. But I kept the tape recorder handy and would turn it on when the class had an interesting conversation. Also, many of the class conversations lasted over many days and if something related to social justice, gender, race, culture, class or similar topics

Each data source has its own inherent weaknesses, but **collecting from a variety of sources** allows me to address this difficulty, while at the same time allowing triangulation of data.

Classrooms are rich with data and part of the research process is choosing what not to use.

was mentioned I made a point of taping our next class discussion. I listened to these tapes afterwards but only transcribed the conversations that I felt were significant. It would have been better to have recorded all of the class conversations, because there is much that I know I missed, but when conducting teacher research it is important to keep the data pool as manageable as possible.

Classrooms are rich with data and part of the research process is choosing what not to use. This means that there are pieces of data that I missed, but unless data is coded it is useless. All of the student work I collected was dated, and I wrote the students' description of their work on the back and then sorted it. I only kept and included work that was given to me by my students, except a few pieces that I photocopied.

I analyzed my data in two main ways. I used a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss 1967) for initial analysis; as I collected the data I would generate initial themes and then I would look at it every two to three weeks and verify those initial themes to see if there was anything happening in the class that I was missing. At the end of the year I took all of the data I had and looked through it, piece by piece, note by note, and then regenerated themes, noticing details I had missed throughout the year.

Findings—The emergence of social justice

In late November, I began to focus my research on one student, Moses.

Moses is the only Black child in a class of 15 children. He is the youngest of four brothers from a very tightly knit family, each looking out for the other. His father and one of his stepbrothers are in jail for various minor offences and his mother is a nurse who works more than anyone should have to, just to provide a home for her boys. His grandmother provides Moses with a roof over his head and occasionally food in his stomach. She is older, outwardly despises males (young boys included), and suffers from severe arthritis. I had to struggle with the bus company for a month to get them to drop Moses at his grandma's house (4 houses down from the stop) so his grandma wouldn't have to make the painful climb up the street and back again.

Moses taught me much during this year in my teaching. I thought I knew about early literacy and how best to teach young children. Moses and this class taught me that I was just at the starting place of my learning. Like any story, this one is incomplete but it represents a beginning of my learning about literacies and is a piece of what I learned and what I am beginning to grasp. What follows is what that class taught me.



The closing of the playground, late October...

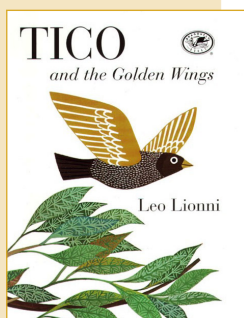
Moses and a small cadre of other students were outraged that the school district was going to tear down our school's playground. An orange snow fence and signs telling kids to Stay Off now surrounded the playground where we played every day. Although we as a class obeyed the signs, after school Moses and his brothers ignored the warnings and played there anyway, ripping down the snow fence. Seeing this closure of the park as an injustice, Moses and his peers wanted to take action. I suggested they could write letters to the Board of Trustees. They did. They also wrote letters to the Chair of the Board. Moses's letter read: "If you tear down our park you will get in trouble!"

The letters (supported by calls from parents) did not go unnoticed. The Chair of the Trustees came to visit our class to tell the students that they would not tear down our playground after all, but fix it instead.

Moses's note: "If you tear down our park you will get in trouble!"

Unfortunately, I did not see this incident as an act of social justice because it dealt with a park. It seemed too insignificant to warrant the title "critical action." It wasn't the type of action I thought would grow out of the critical literacy approach in the classroom. What about the big issues of race, culture, gender, class? I asked myself why my students were unwilling to address these important issues affecting their lives. But the question really was: Why couldn't I see that my students *were* engaging in acts of social justice, just ones that were different from what I had expected.

Tico and the Golden Wings tells the story of a bird born without wings. His friends take care of him. Tico wishes for wings to fly like his friends. He gets his wish and is given a pair of golden wings. His friends believe that he wants to be better than them and leave him. Left alone, Tico roams throughout the world, and as he travels he meets various people in need. He gives each a golden feather, which is then replaced by a black feather. When he has given all his golden feathers away and all of his feathers are black, his friends return to him.



Tico and the Golden Wings

It was perhaps because of Moses's heightened sense of social justice that the class I taught this year was able to teach me so much about social justice, learning, teaching, and critical literacy. Perhaps I finally heard what my students have been trying to teach me all along. Moses was at the center or on the periphery of every major project and discussion dealing with issues of social justice.

I had been trying to use critical literacy to engage my students in discussions that were more relevant to their lived experiences and to move my students to acts of social justice. Early in the year I felt I was not achieving these goals. Every time we started to have a serious discussion about difference, bullying, poverty, or anything else of significant depth, the talk in the class was shut down by a small group of students who insisted that these were not discussions that one had in school. I felt I was failing in my attempts to use a critical literacy framework so I decided to wait and listen more to the needs of my students. I was still unwilling to abandon my desire to explore issues of difference with the class, however, so I decided to do an author study that focused on difference.

I later learned that racial issues had been creeping beneath the surface since the beginning of the year. After I had shared some of the findings of my teacher research with the family members of my students, Colin's mother told me of the following incident.

Colin, looking at the list of students at the beginning of the year, reading off the students' names, proclaimed to his mother, "I'm going to be friends with that boy," pointing to Peter's name on the class list. He then turned and whispered to her, "I hope he doesn't have dark skin."

We had been using books as a springboard for discussion since early in the year because I thought the students might find this an easier way to discuss difference. I chose to study the work of Leo Lionni because I love his books and the way they deal with relationships.

In November we had a breakthrough. While reading *Tico and the Golden Wings* by Lionni (1969) the class and I entered into a serious talk about difference.

Jevani and Moses stopped the reading to talk about why Tico's friends had left him. In the ensuing discussion, focused around the concept of difference, I asked, "Am I different?" The children were undecided but Peter said, "Yes, yes, yes! But you are the same color as us 'cause you're White like us, right?"

Moses took offense at this remark, seeing immediately that he was excluded from the sentiment. A great discussion erupted among the students about race. Several students tried to label each other certain colors, with White being the preferred and clearly privileged color. That is with several notable exceptions. Moses identifies himself strongly with being Black and was offended by Peter's labels and said as much. Jevani and another student refused to accept Peter's labelling them as White and the discussion quickly evolved into one focused on race. Realizing that he had inadvertently opened a Pandora's box, Peter tried to repeatedly "take back" what he had said and stop the discussion but the class had found its voice and this topic was too important to too many of the students to be stopped.



Jevani and Peter working happily together

We kept discussing what was obviously an important issue for the class for several more days. We had finally broken through the code of silence imposed by the students. But at the same time I was frustrated, for although we had unearthed deep racial prejudice, I felt we were actually moving away from my hope for social action. The situation was complicated because I felt I was working within a Pollyanna classroom—the students were happy (though we never dealt with anything which really touched their lives) and the parents were happy because their children were “happy and learning.” I was the only one who was unhappy because I had not been able to break through this wall of silence. Now we were beginning to.

The conversation pulled in more and more students as it continued, and it continued for several days. This brought about the beginning of a change in our class by forcing all of us, willingly or unwillingly, to face the tough issues about race and our own beliefs.

Although this and other discussions that followed were awkward and potentially hurtful, they drew the issue of race into the light and radically changed the class. For the first week after the *Tico* discussion, some students refused to play with each other, apparently responding to what they felt were acts of prejudice. Then the change happened. Students of different races started playing together, actively seeking each other out and collaborating in their play. Prior to this, the children had engaged in parallel play with little or no interaction. Students of different races

Meaningful change occurs at the local level first, and for my students, the classroom was one of their communities.

started to visit each other's homes. We began to have open conversations about difference, race, gender, and class. Because I had been looking for social action that dealt with larger issues I almost missed the social action occurring in the class.

For my kindergarten students, "community" was not the wider community of the school or the geographic area in which we lived. Their community was our class and their families, so the community they worked to change was our class. They would regularly make comments like "Yasman has left the school" when a student left the classroom. They saw the classroom as the school. But I had been so interested in effecting change on a grand scale that I could not see the local. I almost missed what my students were doing. Yet, meaningful change occurs at the local level first, and for my students, the classroom was one of their communities.

Some reflections

I have focused on my students' acts of social justice and how I was blinded by my own tacit assumptions and beliefs. When I listened to my students, and honestly heard what they were saying, I realized the great depth of conversations being held about each book we read. The students quickly learned that they could interrupt a story with questions and experiences that related to the book.

This attitude of questioning was not limited to the critical texts we read in the class, but applied to all books. They made connections between different stories, news events, and their lived experiences during our book discussions, and in their conversation with each other and their teachers. Literacy became a tool that was important and used daily and in powerful ways. The class conversations were sustained more by their relevance to the students' lives than by anything else. Those ideas that were not germane to the students were quickly dropped but those that affected their lives were constantly revisited, by the class as a whole and by students individually.

The feeling that literacies are something that influence and can change their lives led to an active use of literacies by the students in the class.

There were days when Moses would come to school angry or upset about what was happening at home, was said to him, or what he observed as he came to school. On these days he could not focus; if someone entered his personal space he would often lash out. Moses and I established a routine whereby when Moses felt angry or was losing control, he would write—in a journal, on a scrap of paper, or at the computer. He would write until he was calm. By his own choice his writing was for himself alone and was not read by anyone else. He used literacies, in this case writing, to help him to make sense of his world.

I was surprised to note that even though the students produced two or three plays or puppet shows a week, only one play over the year was unrelated to a book read in the class. The students used drama to further explore and understand the in-class book discussions we were having.

All but one student wrote on a regular basis either in a journal or on paper. The students wrote as a free choice; all activity centers in the class were optional and the students moved freely throughout the different centers. The



Moses working out his anger at the computer



One of the many dramas staged in the class



Moses writing

students in this class saw literacies as relevant to their lives. I had never before had the level of involvement in school-based literacies as was exhibited by this class, something which I believe was a result of the critical literacies stance taken throughout the year.

Final thoughts on teacher research, critical literacy, and social justice

The continued involvement of a teacher researching his/her own practice is vital and significant; being involved in the day-to-day lives of my students and classroom allowed me to learn more than I ever could have as a visiting researcher. As a visiting researcher I would never have picked up on the students' understanding of social justice, the integrated and interconnected way in which the students approached literacies, or even that the students' plays were a way to deepen their understanding of the books we were reading in class. The teacher has the privilege of gaining what Bissex terms "enlightened subjectivity" (1980, p. vi) and seeing what might not otherwise be observed or understood. We need research that is the culmination of long-term and intimate contact; we need to allow ourselves to be taught by those whom we are studying and who are directly affected by our research. My students taught me that I need to listen to them, to learn from them, challenging my preconceived notions.



Moses's writing: "I'm as happy as my heart."

This year of teacher research has changed the way I teach and understand young children. I can no longer teach without using teacher research, whether it is a formal study, like this one, or the daily analysis of my classroom practices. Teacher research gives me the attitude of a learner and helps me see how to shape my classroom practice to better guide my students and support their learning. Through collecting and analyzing daily events I have a heightened sense of what is happening in the classroom, freeing me up to better listen to and respond to the needs of my students, allowing me to learn from them.

I learned that for my students the classroom is one of their communities and that small actions can constitute social justice. Local acts of social justice are just as valid as larger ones, perhaps more valid because of their more personal nature. For my students, the classroom and their homes represent their community, their world. My critical literacies practice needs to reflect this

The students viewed literacy as **connected to their lived experiences** and as a tool which could be used effectively to explore and effect change in their lives.

reality, not the grand scale of social change I had originally envisioned. The children also taught me that critical conversations are not hard to maintain when they are the ones to initiate the conversations. Their interest will drive the curriculum and discussions from day to day and week to week.

But the most significant finding I had was that when the students see literacies practices as meaningful and relevant, they begin to use literacies in meaningful ways. They regularly engaged in literate acts that surprised me by their complexity, using school-based literacy far beyond what is commonly recognized as typical for kindergarten. By using critical literacy as a frame through which the students and I designed curricula and used literacies in the classroom, the students viewed literacy as connected to their lived experiences and as a tool which could be used effectively to explore and effect change in their lives.

Moses learned to use literacy as a way to transform and affect the world in which he lived. He used books to negotiate issues of race and poverty. He used writing to make sense of his world. He learned to see literacy as powerful and life changing.

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(cont'd on p. 12)

Reflections on this Teacher Research

Wood's project highlights several important aspects of teacher research in early childhood education:

- 1.** Wood focuses on an important issue—the literacy achievement of young children in today's urban classrooms—that resonates with other early childhood educators.
- 2.** Wood found a researchable question that was “doable” and did not get in the way of his teaching; rather, it enhanced it. Further, he discovered that initial questions and lines of inquiry in teacher research often evolve and change over the course of a project.
- 3.** In terms of data collection, Wood collected important vignettes, critical incidents, anecdotes, work samples, and conversations that provide telling examples of his teaching and Moses's learning.
- 4.** In terms of data analysis, Wood uses selected literature on teacher research and critical literacy as extra lenses for understanding his data.
- 5.** Wood reflects on Moses's learning and also on his own teaching, and makes important connections between the two — effective teacher research projects allow us to understand our children's learning and our own learning as educators.
- 6.** Wood uses the data from his project to consider changes in his literacy teaching—both internal and external—and to see how he can continue using teacher research as a form of professional development in the area of literacy. This is often the greatest challenge and reward in teacher research—making changes in one's thinking and actions to improve children's learning.
- 7.** Wood uses this column in the *Beyond the Journal* to disseminate the findings from his teacher research project, and invites other early childhood colleagues to continue the dialogue on the forms and functions of critical literacy in early childhood.

These, then, are seven key elements of Wood's teacher research project that we hope readers will ruminate on and consider when undertaking their own projects.

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