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Adolescent Literacy and Collaborative Inquiry

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CHAPTER 23

Adolescent Literacy and Collaborative Inquiry

ROBERT SIMON and AMIR KALAN

In a teacher education classroom in Toronto, groups of middle school students, teacher candidates, and university researchers, members of our research collaborative, the Teaching to Learn Project (Simon et al., 2014; Simon & the Teaching to Learn Project, 2014), discuss projects developed from curricula they coauthored for Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986). *Maus* documents Spiegelman's father's recollections of the Holocaust and the author's own struggles to come to terms with what it means to be the child of a Holocaust survivor. Youth and teachers involved in the Teaching to Learn Project collectively worked through what historian Dominick LaCapra (1998) has referred to as the "delicate relationship between empathy and critical distance" (pp. 4–5) in the process of responding to Spiegelman's text, a book that reflects profound human suffering. Through collaborative inquiries, the group attempted to challenge the traditional notion that curriculum is developed *for* students (or for teachers), and instead aimed to work *with* students to meaningfully engage with issues that mattered from individuals' perspectives.

We also coresearched this process. Building on a cross-site partnership between a middle school in the Toronto District School Board and our university, we involved youth and teachers in the process of inquiry. This included data collection, as well as inviting participants to document their understandings through writing, film, video, and conceptual art. This multifaceted collaboration allowed us to explore how adolescents individually and collectively imagine alternative ways of engaging with a text such as *Maus*, while at the same time providing a space for teacher candidates to develop pedagogical practices from listening to and collaborating with students who participated with them on our research team.

In preparation for writing curriculum, students and teachers responded to *Maus* in different forms, ranging from essays to artwork. For example, one group shared a

diorama they created to express empathy with victims and survivors of the Holocaust and outrage at the continued prevalence of anti-Semitism provoked by Holocaust deniers (see Figure 23.1). A large white box papered in “White Pride” propaganda, the diorama included cutouts through which recreated scenes from the book could be seen. In their presentation about their project to the larger group, one of the youth described these holes as representing “the holes in [Holocaust deniers’] stories. They are kind of making up facts, and it’s not really true at all.” Another student described the inside of the box as their attempt to portray “what actually happened in the Holocaust. It’s supposed to be a scene in just like a regular town in Poland, and how the Holocaust affected it.” These scenes portrayed suffering experienced by Polish Jews, constructed with paper, velum, paint, collage, and cardboard: figures of Jews depicted as mice hanging in a public square or huddled in an attic crawl space, hiding from Nazi soldiers.

Critical collaborative inquiries can generate the empathy, solidarity, and activist responses intended by writers such as Spiegelman (1986), who share their difficult histories in literary works. One student noted, “I had learned about the Holocaust before, but what I got out of this project was how emotionally connected people were.” Another student emphasized the impact of intergenerational collaboration: “I liked working with the teacher candidates because it’s good to hear input not only from people your age but also from people who are older.” One of the teachers noted, “I appreciated the risk the students took in the projects that they did. It was great to see what learners are capable of doing when given the chance.”



FIGURE 23.1. Youth and teacher candidates author curriculum for *Maus* and coresearch the process: Plan and final diorama exploring empathy and Holocaust denial, 2015.

This research partnership suggests questions related to the function of collaboration in literacy research:

- What role might collaborative inquiry play in helping individuals make sense of texts?
- How can teachers and students in a research context work together across differences to gain more nuanced understandings of our shared social world?
- How might participatory research be a means of mobilizing multiple perspectives in learning from adolescents' diverse literacy practices, in and out of school?
- What are the potentials of collective research of this nature for actualizing curricular, pedagogical, and social change?

In this chapter we explore how university researchers work with youth, families, community members, and teachers across a professional lifespan to investigate adolescent literacy pedagogy. Situating our understandings of adolescent literacy as a complex of practices taken hold of locally for diverse social and political purposes (Street, 1995), we call for attention to critical, collaborative, participatory, inquiry-based investigations in literacy, which we believe have renewed significance in a policy context dominated by more positivistic paradigms of research and professional practice. First, we define collaborative practitioner inquiry, highlighting key dimensions of participatory forms of research. We then review literacy research in which inquiry-based collaborations are taken up for diverse purposes, using varied methods, and taking place in a range of social and institutional contexts. Finally, we return to the example of the *Maus* project in our conclusion to illustrate the potential of collaborative research as a means of deepening our understandings of adolescent literacy and our approaches to teaching adolescents in increasingly transnational and multimodal contexts of teaching and learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Our understanding of collaborative research in adolescent literacy is informed by the conceptualization of practitioner inquiry as an epistemological and methodological *stance* on practice. This notion of *inquiry as a stance* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) suggests the relational and ideological dimensions of collaborative research, highlighting how and who researchers are relative to others, as well as emphasizing the larger political purposes of their work. Practitioner inquiry hinges on the epistemological notion that in educational research the *insider* position of teachers should receive particular attention. Most educational research has traditionally been conducted by outsiders and might therefore lack perspectives that can only be provided by insiders—including educators and youth whose experiences and perspectives are embedded in sites of practice. Through an analysis of alternative ways teachers record and present their research—from more traditional venues, such as journals or essays, to less traditional approaches, such as oral inquiry processes used to analyze student works (Martin & Schwartz, 2014; Simon, 2013; Strieb, Carini, Kanevsky, & Wice, 2011) or arts-based curriculum inquiries such as those we highlight in the example that opens our chapter—Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1992) emphasize that “school-based teacher researchers are themselves knowers and a primary source of generating knowledge about teaching and learning for themselves and

others” (p. 447). Though this claim may seem obvious—who, after all, is better positioned to experience literacy teaching and learning than educators and students themselves?—the argument that teachers are well positioned to research practice remains radical in educational contexts marked by heightened accountability, surveillance of teachers, promotion of unified standards, the rise of so-called “value-added” evaluation models (Clayton, 2013; Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2011), and reentrenched scientism in research on teaching that promotes epistemic hierarchies.

We note here a key characteristic of many forms of practitioner inquiry: a tendency to initiate different forms of collaboration in order to challenge dominant institutional structures and their hierarchical organization:

Practitioner inquiry shares a sense of the practitioner as knower and agent of educational and social change. It also fosters new kinds of social relationships that assuage the isolation of teaching and other sites of practice. This is especially true in inquiry communities structured to foster deep intellectual discourses about critical issues. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 37)

Accordingly, we explore the collaborative possibilities for investigating critical aspects of adolescent literacy experienced by different teacher inquiry communities, teacher–researcher collaborations, and youth participatory action research initiatives. We have organized our overview of collaborative research in adolescent literacy by how the teachers and researchers involved in these projects name their work, how they situate their projects conceptually or ideologically, what research paradigms they draw upon, and how they understand the audiences for their research. In our analysis we were guided by a framework suggested by Lytle (2000), who highlights the ways in which practitioner researchers situate themselves in connection to the *legacies* that inform their work; their *location* or *positionality* as researchers; the local *communities* and broader *neighborhood* of the research, teaching, or social action within which they are situated; and, ultimately, the manner of change or work in the world toward which their inquiries are *oriented*.

The term *legacy* highlights the backgrounds of practitioner researchers in two specific ways: first, an educator’s personal background and how it is connected to his or her practice and research; and second, the research paradigms and the traditions of inquiry practitioners come from and bring with them into the field. Thinking about educators’ legacies within their sites of practice naturally invites reflections on their positionality in relation to participants and objects of inquiry or what Lytle (2000) refers to as their *location* in their research, which she describes as “‘positions relative to other systems or organizations, and thus the particularities of school context and collegial relationships, stance on practice, relationships with students, questions and etiologies of questions as well as their perceptions of the complex relationships of teaching and research” (p. 705).

Unlike other methodologies, practitioner inquiry commonly takes place in *community*; practitioner researchers often work in collaboration or relationship with others situated within sites of practice that host or benefit from their inquiries. Although each community has its unique nature, different communities are either directly or in subtle ways connected to each other. Communities learn from each other, cooperate, compete, and are often shaped by conflicts or micropolitics that can produce “constructive controversy” (Achinstein, 2002, p. 448). Mobilizing these processes in communities

of inquiry, educators partner with others to address feelings of “disequilibrium and conflict” (Anderson & Saavedra, 1995) in their practices and communicate their visions of educational change with neighboring communities.

Acknowledging the deeply local nature of literacy (Street, 1995) and teaching, Lytle (2000) argues for a reconceptualized and reinvigorated notion of the local in literacy research in relation to the concept of *neighborhood* (drawing on Moshenberg, 1996), which she describes as “a conceptual space or vicinity in which the salient concern is not an essentialized identity but rather one’s *location relative to others*” (p. 709; emphasis added). Finally, she suggests a need to consider *orientation* in practitioner inquiry, which “takes into account the intricacies of genre, topic, purpose, and audience” (p. 699). In our gloss, a consideration of *neighborhood* and *orientation* foregrounds what and who collaborative research in adolescent literacy is ultimately for, as well as its locus of change, whether at individual, institutional (classroom, university, district, or school-based), or broader social levels.

COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY AS A MEANS OF INVESTIGATING LITERACY FOR AND WITH ADOLESCENTS

For adolescents, literacy encompasses a range of practices in and out of school, shaped by culture, ideology, and identity, mobilized for an array of critical purposes (e.g., Alvermann, 2007; Dickar, 2004; Elkins & Luke, 1999; Mahiri, 2004; Moje, 2002; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009; Winn, 2015). In this section we provide a brief overview of how collaborative inquiry has been taken up by educators to explore adolescent literacy practices and literacy pedagogy for adolescents. This includes school- and classroom-based inquiries by literacy teachers, conducted with colleagues and students (e.g., Broderick, 2014; Cone, 2002; Waff, 1995); the work of teacher inquiry communities (e.g., Jones, 2014; Riley, 2015; Simon, 2015a); participatory action research with adolescents (e.g., Wright & Mahiri, 2012; Morrell, 2006); and cross-site collaborations, like the *Maus* project we described previously, that entail partnerships across institutional and community-based contexts (e.g., Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013).

School- and Classroom-Based Collaborative Inquiry

As teacher researcher Cynthia Ballenger (2009) has explained, literacy educators often face what she terms *puzzling moments* in their practices, for instance, when they feel doubtful about their approaches to teaching diverse adolescents, when tensions emerge in the classroom, or when students raise unpredictable questions or appear reluctant to communicate their reactions to shared texts. In response to these uncertainties, teachers engage with different forms of intentional inquiry, often in collaboration with students, through which they (1) identify moments of dissonance, (2) adopt a systematic approach to collect data that can shed light on their questions, and (3) take an inquiry stance and consciously reflect on dissonant moments in ways that inform others and feed back into their own practices (Pincus, 2001). Moreover, many dissonant moments occurring in middle or secondary literacy classrooms are somehow rooted in sensitive issues such as cultural and linguistic difference, race, ethnicity, class, gender, equity, access, and

accountability. Teachers themselves also have different *legacies*. They and their students frequently come from different ethnic, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds, which require complicated forms of identity negotiation when they have to deal with moments of doubt, disharmony, or uncertainty.

Activist literacy teachers often use feelings of dissonance as catalysts for inquiry with colleagues. Joan Cone (2002), for example, became concerned with what she and colleagues came to regard as the “caste-like” academic tracking of students into ability groups in her California school’s English program (p. 1), in particular African American males, who were the majority in her “low”-ability ninth-grade classes even though they did not represent a majority of the school’s population. Her inquiries with colleagues in her department led them to wonder about their own complicity in the “co-construction” of low achievement in English classes (Cone, 2005). They attempted to address these inequities by creating heterogeneous classes and opening advanced placement classes to any student with the desire to enroll. Cone’s scholarship records how faculty members needed to call into question their own perceptions of adolescents’ literacy abilities to accompany structural changes, coming to recognize how adolescents’ perceived “failure” and “achievement” in literacy are social constructs that impact teachers’ interpretation of adolescents’ literate abilities and students’ placement and performance in school. Cone and her colleagues’ inquiries resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of Latin@ and African American adolescents who qualified for the University of California and California State entrance requirements. In spite of this progress, Cone notes that her school district reinstated tracking under the auspices of meeting “adequate yearly progress” under No Child Left Behind (Cone, 2005).

Many teacher researchers have explored collaborative inquiries with students into the intersections of language, identity, and social justice. Following in the tradition of June Jordan (1988), Fecho (2000) explored language and power with his African American and Caribbean American students. Inspired by students’ concerns about the marginalization of Black English in the curriculum, Fecho (2000) documents how their yearlong collaborative inquiry moved beyond “an assignment to be completed solely because I had requested it” to become a “personal need to be filled through academic means” (p. 369) that helped him to recognize how adolescent literacy and language is closely connected to issues of identity and culture. Diane Waff (1994, 1995) and her students engaged in female-only conversations they called “girl talk” sessions, as well as conversations about gender in mixed-gender classrooms. Their collective inquiries brought to the surface how gendered talk influences girls’ social and academic identities and self-perceptions. In her classroom-based inquiries, Linda Christensen (2000, 2009) documents how adolescents mobilize language, including poetry, as a means of exploring their family legacies and cultural histories within a broader social justice curriculum. Christensen and Dyan Watson (2015) note that inviting students to use poetry as a vehicle for exploring issues that matter to them allows “students’ lives—the ‘landscape and bread’ of their homes, their ancestors, their struggles and joys—[to be] invited into classrooms as subjects worthy of study” (p. 3).

Collective inquiries with adolescents often inform teachers’ curricular and pedagogical choices as well as their own stances as educators. Like Cone, Smokey Wilson (2007) investigated the persistent overrepresentation of African American students in remedial courses in a community college context. Wilson inquired into her students’ experiences of schooling and what she terms the “literacies of college” they need to be successful.

For example, Wilson documents her inquiries with a student who described being publicly shamed in school for being a struggling reader. This experience prompted Wilson to explore material questions related to her students' experiences of school failure and her own responsibility as an educator. "I needed to know why the remedial classes were almost always filled with African American students. Why were they almost never in the classes reading Thoreau's *Walden* . . . ? Why did some learners succeed while others continued old patterns?" (p. 3). Lalitha Vasudevan (2006/2007) describes her inquiries of a student with whom she worked in a program designed to support adolescents who had prior encounters with the juvenile justice system. Vasudevan explains how they became co-learners who "read the world" (Freire, 1970/2005) together, developing a relationship through shared research into the students' interest in Kawasaki motorcycles. Each of these cases demonstrates how educators' inquiries with students inform their understandings of adolescent literacy, as well as their approaches to teaching literacy to adolescents.

In addition to feeding into pedagogy and deepening relationships with students who are repositioned as co-inquirers, teachers' collaborative research sometimes involve theorizing about literacy to speak back to conceptualizations proliferated by university researchers (Simon, Campano, Broderick, & Pantoja, 2012). To take one example, Debora Broderick's (2014) research documents how she and her students adopted a multiliteracies approach in their creation of a high school literary arts journal, *Concrete Voices*. Broderick's project not only facilitated multimodal literacy practices but it also invited her colleagues and other educators to "re-think the at-risk label" (p. 198). Broderick takes up the notion of participatory culture from Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robinson (2009, p. 59), a vision of classrooms as spaces in which "everyone knows something, nobody knows everything, and what any one person knows can be tapped by the group as a whole." Ultimately, Broderick retheorizes multiliteracies in terms of her students' collaborative inquiries. She argues that what she terms *collaborative design* is "a theoretical hybrid approach that captures the complexities of both the creation of multimodal texts and the rich communities from which they flourish" (Broderick, 2014, p. 198). The work of Broderick and other classroom-based researchers who have co-inquired with colleagues and youth indicates how critical, participatory inquiries in classrooms shift attention from individualized, deficit orientations to reposition students and teachers as knowledgeable and integral to the research process (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009; Morell, 2006).

Literacy Teacher Inquiry Communities

The examples of Cone (2002, 2005), Broderick (2014), and others suggest that, for literacy teachers, working within and against the constraints of everyday teaching can be daunting. As Snow-Gerono (2004) notes, "It is not always, not even usually, acceptable in schools to ask questions about mandates handed down from district or state administrators" (p. 242). As a result, teachers might creep into isolation to "fend off the disruptions and distractions that so often come from being too caught up in an overwhelming system" (Hobson, 2001, p. 175). Inquiry communities can be a means for literacy teachers to combat isolation and develop critical solidarity with colleagues, inspired by Freirean (1970/2005) problem-posing and problem solving-processes that reveal power dynamics and help them to address equity issues in schools (Ritchie, 2012; Simon, 2015a; Simon & Campano, 2013).

Slavit and Nelson (2005) describe “*supported teacher collaborative inquiry* as a model of professional development that includes long-term support for teacher-led inquiry in a group setting” (p. 2) in which “teachers have the opportunity to share beliefs, instructional perspectives, and co-construct new meaning around notions of pedagogy” (p. 3). Drawing on her experiences as a literacy teacher researcher over many years, Waff (2009, p. 70) documents how communities help teachers move “out from the isolation of the classroom to the shelter of inquiry communities that provided safe spaces for real dialogue, the sharing of stories, [and] relationships with colleagues.” Rather than merely mollifying teachers’ concerns, inquiry communities create spaces for colleagues to “generate new knowledge that helps teachers make a difference in improving student learning” (p. 70), supporting critical self-reflexivity into issues of race, power, and social contexts of schooling and informing critical literacy pedagogy for adolescents.

As we noted previously, literacy teachers’ collaborative inquiries are often sparked by moments of uncertainty or dissonance (Ballenger, 2009; Pincus, 2001); teacher inquiry communities can “provide a shift to uncertainty and appreciation for dialogue in collaboration” (Snow-Geron, 2005, p. 249). Inquiry communities also encourage individuals to develop critical and culturally relevant curriculum for adolescents. For example, the Bread Loaf Teacher Network, a technology-facilitated learning community for urban and rural literacy teachers in the United States, has supported educators to create “innovative online projects designed to promote culturally sensitive and transformative literacy” (Bread Loaf Teacher Network, n.d.; see also Goswami & Stillman, 1987). Teacher inquiry communities differ from most professional development programs in that they are organized by teacher researchers themselves to tackle tangible problems they contend with, predicated on horizontal rather than hierarchical conceptions of knowledge generation (Campano, Honeyford, Sánchez, & Vander Zanden, 2010; Freire, 1970/2005), and may therefore be regarded as grassroots sources of educational innovation (Ghisso, Campano, & Simon, 2014).

Adolescent literacy teachers have initiated and participated in inquiry communities for an array of purposes. For example, teachers have created communities that meet regularly to improve their approaches to teaching diverse adolescents (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Castle & Dickey, 2014; Snow-Geron, 2005), especially by developing “new ways of looking at, listening to, and learning from their students” (Michaels, 2004, p. vii) in order to reflect on vital aspects of adolescent learning, literacy, or their own practices (Hobson, 2009). Some communities have been formed to discuss employing critical pedagogies in the classroom (Jones, 2014; Kramer & Jones, 2009; Rogers, Mosley, Kramer, & the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group, 2009) particularly to reengage disenfranchised students in classroom-based literacies (Jones, 2014; Riley, 2015; Waff, 2009). Literacy teachers gather together to experiment with research dissemination in a variety of forms, including fieldnotes, reflections, poetry, digital portfolios, artwork, and blogging, as well as more traditional forms of research presentation (Jones, 2014; Autrey et al., 2005). Many teachers organize inquiry communities around the shared goal of challenging normative structures and practices in schools. For example, Blackburn, Clark, Kenney, and Smith (2010) document the work of the Pink TIGers, an inquiry community of educators from urban, suburban, and rural schools, who came together to challenge homophobia, support teachers to create alliances with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) adolescents, and develop anti-homophobic practices in their classrooms.

Inquiry communities can encourage teachers to recognize how adolescents are already literate in ways that are often unrecognized in school (Simon, 2012). Riley (2015) documents a study group that she formed with five literacy teachers from different urban schools. She describes how participating teachers used this community as a space to define and enact critical literacy pedagogy. This included deepening their understandings of adolescent literacy and challenging dominant conceptions of what counts as literacy in school. For example, one teacher described her working definition of *adolescent literacy*, developed through shared inquiries with colleagues, which Riley, following Richardson (1997), rendered in the form of a data poem:

When I think of it,
when I think “literacy,”
I just think about how students identify themselves
and how they understand the world around them and how they view their place within
the world around them.

(Riley, 2015, p. 420).

This example suggests how inquiry communities can help teachers to work against the grain of dominant conceptions and practices, and to acknowledge and embody sociocultural perspectives on literacy that better account for adolescents’ unique cultural histories, representational choices, and concerns.

Simon (2015b) documents the work of an inquiry community formed by teacher candidates who met regularly during their teacher education program and into their first 2 years in the classroom. These teachers used inquiries into adolescents’ literacy practices to work against the grain of dominant narratives of urban adolescents’ resistance or disengagement with literacy (Gadsden, Davis, & Artiles, 2009). One teacher explored how a student, who had appeared disengaged in class, cultivated a critical disposition rooted in his experiences of systemic injustices. She wrote about how this incident informed her own critique of schooling:

There is a disjuncture between what students learn in schools, specifically literacy skills, and how it applies in their real lives. This difference of beliefs is striking, and I wonder if any of it has root in Will’s questioning of his own education. . . . It is impossible to have faith in an institution if you believe it is not teaching what you think is important (Simon, 2015a, p. 243)

Local teacher inquiry communities are often supported by networks such as the National Writing Project (NWP), which connects universities and communities of educators, with the broader aim of using inquiry as a means of improving writing pedagogy. The NWP has promoted peer-to-peer professional development and research for inservice teachers in urban and rural sites across the United States since 1974 (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). Their principles position literacy teachers as knowledge generators and agents of change, considering the role of universities in supporting teachers who would like to improve conditions through reflection, inquiry, and theory-informed action. This emphasis on the impact of teachers as agents of change—particularly achieved through collective inquiry—is not accidental. The program consciously follows a teacher-centered agenda best manifested in its Teacher Inquiry Communities (TIC) Network.

In a study supported by the NWP, Jones (2014) collected stories from participating teachers in a TIC about how relationships with disenfranchised students have helped them to “cultivate a critical way of being” (p. 5). One of the teachers in this community described learning from the literacies and creative writing abilities of a student who, in spite of his prior struggles with academic writing, learned to navigate school barriers successfully with his teacher’s help. Supporting teacher inquiries in local communities like this one, the NWP attempts to create channels of communication between teacher researchers in different sites of practice nationwide, with the following goals:

- To develop a more national and encompassing vision of teacher research for the NWP and the teaching profession as a whole
- To create a structure for the pooling of geographically and culturally informed knowledge that has national implications
- To increase the capacity of NWP sites to address issues of equity, access, and accountability, and serve as a mechanism to gather data that address those issues. (National Writing Project, 2015, n.p.)

Among numerous reports provided by the teachers and researchers involved in TIC, Castle and Dickey (2014) have written about “the power of collaborative teacher research” (p. 1). In their project, a group of female literacy teachers studied the literacy practices of their male students to understand why the boys did not engage with reading as much as the teachers expected. The teachers decided to share their frustration with their colleagues and to discuss the challenges they faced when inviting the boys to read. They formed a community of inquiry to reflect on their experiences more systemically.

The teachers took the following steps. They reviewed teacher research literature as a source of inspiration to learn about other teachers’ experiences with the same problem, and to learn about the views, contexts, and methods of other teacher inquiry communities. They met as a community on a “No guilt!” basis, which let the teachers skip meetings and not feel guilty about it, although members hardly missed the gatherings. They created protocols to structure their approach to data collection and analysis. They brought fieldnotes to receive feedback from other members and collaboratively analyzed their data. Their collaborative inquiry revealed that “they had judged much of the content of boys’ interests as not appropriate to express in school, or even ‘gross’ (such as boys’ fascination with bodily functions and noises). . . . The findings forced the teachers to rethink gender and their own gender biases in teaching as well as in their personal lives” (p. 4).

Castle and Dickey (2014) describe the results of creating their teacher inquiry community as follows:

It is never easy to admit the need to change. They were very surprised to find that boys’ interests were so different from what they had been teaching. It is to their credit that their [the teachers’] high level of professionalism allowed them to recognize their own gender biases and decide change was necessary in their teaching in order to address the needs of boys and of all their students. (p. 5)

Castle and Dickey’s (2014) study is an example of how inquiry communities can encourage teachers to recognize adolescents’ literacy needs and interests, and equip them with the intellectual inspiration needed to challenge institutional restrictions and

strengthen their positions as agents of change. Once teachers start collaborating through inquiry, everyday challenges, moments of confusion, or dissatisfaction with students' behavior can become catalysts for pedagogical and even structural reform. Castle and Dickey describe how inquiry allowed teachers to shift their focus from what they had previously regarded as male students' "gross" or "inappropriate" behavior toward an inquiry into their own biases as educators. In this respect, inquiry communities can help teachers to regard redefining their pedagogical principles not as a sign of weakness but rather as a natural part of their own identity negotiation and professional development.

Youth Participatory Action Research in Literacy

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) in adolescent literacy involves collaborations among educators, students, and community members, oriented toward investigating and addressing issues identified by youth themselves. Participatory action researchers value how the epistemologies, literacies, and social practices of adolescents and their communities impact the research process (Camarota & Fine, 2008). YPAR actively relies on the knowledge adolescents bring with them into sites of learning (Cahill, 2007) and draws on indigenous understandings of collaboration and knowledge building (Tuck, 2009). As Guerrero, Gaztambibe-Fernández, Rosas, and Guerrero (2013) note, youth participatory action researchers do not study adolescents but work alongside them:

YPAR entails action-oriented and critical work enacted in the best interests of youth by and with youth; YPAR values youth knowledge about their lived experiences and opens up community space for them to critically examine these experiences; YPAR considers youth capable of becoming critical researchers, public intellectuals, and proactive advocates of change. (p. 109)

As a result, Guerrero et al.'s (2013) research documents how adolescents in their project developed research literacy skills. Through YPAR, adolescents become inquirers: They read research literature, produce reports, correspond with adults, present their findings, and so forth. Morrell (2006) similarly describes YPAR as scholarship intending to "inspire multiple transformative outcomes including individual development and social action" (p. 7). Although knowledge generation through research is crucial in YPAR, "an equally important focus is the development of students' literacies through innovating and empowering classroom curricula and pedagogies. . . . Youth participatory action research seeks to develop young people as empowered agents of change through a process that also addresses larger issues of social inequality" (p. 7).

YPAR is a way to *humanize* (Paris & Winn, 2014) adolescent literacy research by placing researchers, teachers, and students on equal ground. In other words, YPAR involves regarding active participation in research not merely as the domain of an elite class of scholars but also as a fundamental human right (Appadurai, 2006), encouraging youth to use research as a means of making sense of their own literacy learning. YPAR is not only a way to study students' literacy practices, but is often a vehicle to generate engagement (Morell, 2006), a method of community building and creating opportunities for learning. YPAR in adolescent literacy often involves students of color (Bertrand, 2014; Guerrero et al., 2013; Livingstone, Celemencki, & Calixte, 2014), underprivileged, or

marginalized students (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Fox, 2011) in order to help them take action to transform inequitable conditions they identify in their schools and communities.

YPAR connects with literacy in two ways. First, it involves students in the process of research, so that they can engage with literacy as researchers. Second, it helps students make sense of their literacy practices and become conscious of their learning processes and the sociocultural circumstances that foster or hinder them. An example of the former is the Positive Youth Development (PYD) program initiated by Wright and Mahiri (2012) to bring youth and adults together to try alternative curricular and pedagogical approaches that can create literacy development. PYD approaches attempt to engage students that have been marginalized by dominant pedagogical practices. Wright and Mahiri initiated a youth-led YPAR project in an urban community-based organization. In this project, they invited 10 community members including eight youth (ages 13–18) and two adult facilitators to study collaboratively the impact of project-based learning on the members' literacy practices. The project was to assess the needs of the community and to think of plans for development. Wright and Mahiri document how the project helped Pepe, previously resistant to traditional reading activities, eagerly engage with reading. "Pepe and two team members mapped neighborhood assets, read materials on the neighborhood's immigration and factory labor history, took notes during a walking tour of the neighborhood, and created a skit that illustrated the neighborhood's sociohistorical conditions and needs" (p. 126).

Next to creating opportunities for youth to engage with literacy, YPAR also invites participants to consciously take an inquiry stance on their lives and literacy practices. These projects can create opportunities for students, alongside teachers and researchers, to think about the factors that enhance or hinder their engagement with literacy in school. For instance, Livingstone et al. (2014) conducted a project in Montreal that brought together 16 Black adolescents and four adults (two researchers and two community workers) to study the educational challenges of Black students. The students attended research training sessions to become familiar with qualitative research methods and were invited to lead the project asking why some Black students did not feel successful at school. In the process of the research, they found out that the progress of Black youth was impeded by factors beyond classroom activities or individual interest in subjects. These factors included, school culture, and the socioeconomic conditions of students' neighborhoods.

Similarly, Brown and Rodriguez (2009) involved marginalized youth in the United States in investigations into everyday struggles that negatively impact their learning. Drawing on the work of Gutiérrez (2008) and others, Bertrand (2014) created a *third space* in which educational policymakers and a group of Black youth investigated how racism manifested itself in the educational system and hindered the educational lives of students of color. As these examples suggest, participatory research often involves the constructive disruption of institutional structures and practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), and therefore presents challenges to the status quo, as well as to individuals involved in YPAR, particularly researchers who situate their participatory projects within schools. Guerrero et al. (2013) described Proyecto Latin@, a YPAR project conducted in collaboration with a group of Latin@ students in the Toronto District School Board, in order to identify the challenges experienced by participating youth in navigating social and institutional barriers they faced. The research team experienced its own

set of challenges in the process, including confronting “public expectations, community and media perceptions, negotiations of our roles as project co-facilitators, and the tensions that arise when attempting to embody the youth-centred principles of YPAR while delivering a senior social science credit course” (p. 105).

Irizarry and Brown (2014) document their school-based YPAR, including ARISE—Action Research into School Exclusion—a 2-year project involving Black and Latin@ adolescents who had experienced significant academic or disciplinary troubles. Though all youth in the project had been institutionally labeled as academically “disabled,” “the research team chose to examine how particular experiences, beliefs, and actions, which are logical responses to economic, sociopolitical, and educational marginalization, get interpreted as ‘disordered’” (p. 69). Findings from this research informed workshops for preservice teachers, as well as academic presentations, demonstrating how YPAR supports the learning of educators, as well as youth.

Cross-Site Collaborations in Literacy Education

Burrige, Carpenter, Cherednichenko, and Kruger (2010) employed Giddens’s (1984) *structuration theory* to explain why their teacher education program at Victoria University in Australia was mainly structured around inquiry-based partnerships. A brief glance at *structuration theory* can help us better understand the necessity of initiating collaborations in educational research and explain how cross-site partnerships can maximize the impact of critical adolescent literacy research. If one regards the function, creation, and reproduction of social systems as caused by both *structure* and *agents*, the potential of human agency to reform systems becomes a valuable resource. Attention to the power of the agency of individuals working within and against a system can help teachers and researchers view education as a phenomenon not entirely shaped by structure. In other words, an emphasis on human agency re-renders education as a social practice with phenomenological and hermeneutic dimensions. A productive structure in this regard is a structure closely connected to individuals’ beliefs, practices, textual backgrounds, and meaning-making processes, as opposed to a “well-made” structure engineered by experts to be imposed on teachers and students.

Using this theoretical framework, we might better appreciate the importance of cross-site collaborations in inquiry-based literacy education. As we have discovered in the process of working with students, teachers, and university researchers in the Teaching to Learn Project, initiating partnerships among individuals from different sites of practice and research has the potential to multiply the myriad experiences that people bring with them into learning and research communities, strengthening the human agency that can constructively challenge outmoded structures, practices, and curriculum. For example, the arts-based inquiries that resulted in students’ intricate representation of trauma, empathy, and Holocaust denial we described at the outset of this chapter were informed by how individuals mobilized their diverse perspectives and experiences in the service of deepening their awareness in the process of designing innovative social justice curricula. This approach to inquiry is particularly meaningful in adolescent literacy research, since individuals’ experiences are tightly bound with their literacy practices. In other words, if literacy is understood as practices grounded in sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts, simplified microscopic investigations may not be the best way to understand how people

engage with literacy. Adolescents' literacy practices are multidimensional; happen within and across multiple sites (in and out of schools); are fostered or hindered by interactions at home, in their communities, at school, and among their peers; and include complicated textual exchanges. Accordingly, research on socially situated literacy practices benefits from cross-site, inquiry-based collaborations.

Similarly, in critical approaches to teaching and learning literacy, cross-site collaborations are powerful vehicles for encouraging students to broaden their views of literacy and to experience new forms of social action. If adolescents are regarded as potential "organic intellectuals" (Gramsci, 2010), they need to see their sites of learning as greater than the classroom. In documenting their research collaborations across school–university boundaries with youth, teachers, administrators, in an urban school district in the Midwestern United States, Campano et al. (2013) describe how cross-site, cross-cultural experiences help students regard education as a means of "[mobilizing] their cultural identities for critical ends" (p. 98).

Whereas traditional methodologies often favor a top-down model in which researchers carry out investigations in isolation and provide teachers and students with solutions, cross-site collaborations enable educators to restructure sites of learning for an organically formed "literacy vision" (Jetton, Cancienne, & Greever, 2008). Though such partnerships are not unproblematic (Pappas, 2005), cross-site research can allow communities, students, teachers, and researchers to democratically develop critical, community-oriented, and student-centered approaches to literacy learning. In other words, cross-site research is a form of *praxis inquiry* (Burrige et al., 2010), in which inquiry equals action, an attempt to reach out to communities and institutions to involve all the stakeholders in the process of education.

Most reports on cross-site, inquiry-based collaborations in adolescent literacy education focus on university–school partnerships (Campano et al., 2010, 2013; Comber, Kamler, Hood, Moreau, & Painter, 2004; Jetton et al., 2008; Zeller Mayer & Tabak, 2006). University–school collaborations are formed by researchers, teachers, and sometimes students coming together to reflect on pedagogical and literacy practices, and consequently to transform them. These collaborations sometimes take the form of participatory action research, or resemble inquiry communities supported by academics and researchers (Simon et al., 2014).

Park, Simpson, Bicknell, and Michaels (2015) describe a university–school partnership that studied the effectiveness of Poetry Inside Out (PIO), a literacy project designed to help English language learners in English-dominant schools improve their academic literacy by means of poetry and translation. The two English teachers (Simpson and Bicknell) and the two academics (Park and Michaels) believed that engaging with poetry and translation would help English learners see themselves as "linguistic and cultural beings who use language to participate in, and speak to, their worlds" (p. 51). PIO was designed "to create a playful and safe space where students can take risks and delve into facets of language such as word meaning, grammar/syntactic structures, metaphoric language, and nuances of rhythm or rhyme" (p. 51). Park et al. describe how teachers and researchers partnered in the research process:

Together we developed two goals for our research: (1) document and reflect on the implementation of PIO with English learners, noting issues or questions that emerge for

the teachers, and (2) document and reflect on the kinds of student learning fostered by PIO. . . . The data collection and analysis were carried out by teachers and university-based researchers. (p. 52)

This suggests how university–school research collaborations can involve all partners in the research process, from design, data collection, and analysis, to research dissemination and even coauthorship.

One important form of university–school partnership involves collaborations with preservice teachers (Burridge et al., 2010; Fritz, Cooner, & Stevenson, 2009). Such partnerships allow teacher candidates to enter schools to engage with adolescents and reflect on their practices as teacher researchers while learning in the university. For example, collaborative inquiries in the Teaching to Learn Project coincide with a literacy methods course one of us teaches at University of Toronto, providing opportunities for new teachers to explore critical issues in teaching and learning alongside adolescents (Simon et al., 2014).

Cross-site collaborations, however, are not limited to university–school partnerships. These collaborations can include other institutions and individuals, such as governmental offices, museums, art galleries, factories, and professionals with different expertise, including visual artists (Simon & the Teaching to Learn Project, 2014; Goodman, 2015) and poets (Fisher, 2007; Jocson, 2005). Cross-site inquiries sometimes involve educators working together across their different institutions. Lewis (2009), a high school teacher in a border community in Arizona, describes a unique cross-continent inquiry into language, culture, and social justice involving herself, an English headmaster (Michael Armstrong), a college professor in South Africa (Lusanda Mayikana), and a primary school teacher in Lawrence, Massachusetts (Mary Guerrero). Influenced by the work of the Breadloaf Teacher Network (Goswami & Stillman, 1987), their inquiry involved students as coresearchers who, along with their teachers, shared “language memoirs” that provided Lewis (2009) with a “revolutionary forum” to learn from her students about their experiences of bilingualism, which in turn fed into her own practice as a bilingual educator (pp. 52–53).

Researchers and teachers involved in cross-site inquiries often adopt critical paradigms that value students’ home languages and out-of-school literacy practices (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1991), and utilize research as a catalyst for school or social change. Rogers et al. (2009) document the efforts of a teacher-coordinated collective comprised of teachers “across the lifespan,” who collaborated with university-based educators and activists to explore how adolescents can mobilize critical literacy to “make changes in people’s lives” (p. 22). In her investigation of adolescents’ lives and literacies and innovative pedagogies in Harlem schools, Kinloch (2010) developed partnerships with youth, educators, and community activists who were involved in data analysis and authored response pieces to Kinloch’s own research. Rogers, Morrell, and Enyedy (2007) describe how partnerships among university researchers and adolescents encouraged youth to develop identities as critical researchers. Kamler and Comber (2005) describe how early year and experienced teachers worked together in an inquiry community they formed to explore the roots of school inequities. This community provided a “discursive space where teachers could talk about poverty, violence, racism and classism” (p. 228), among other issues, with the goal of addressing the problem of unequal literacy outcomes. These examples demonstrate the role cross-site inquiries can play in critical

literacy education, encouraging teachers to link adolescent literacy with social justice education (Miller, Beliveau, Destigter, Kirkland, & Peggy, 2008).

CONCLUSION

With these insights in mind we return to the vignette that opens this chapter. Middle school students, teachers, teacher candidates, and university researchers came together in the Teaching to Learn Project with the goal of designing critical literacy curriculum. We developed collaborations with adolescents to facilitate the emergence of activities that may engage students in meaningful ways with literature relating traumatic experiences, with the goal of challenging dominant top-down curriculum development processes. The project, at the same time, involved cross-site inquiry. We met in the students' classroom at their school; they attended teacher education classes at our university, and we visited an art gallery together. Our shared research was a part of the official curriculum for middle school students and assignments in teacher candidates' literacy methods course.

As illustrated by the examples we have reviewed throughout the chapter, collaborative inquiries in this community involve more than any single individuals' perspectives. To make the most of our collective experiences, youth and teachers shared family history narratives in small groups, describing their family's participation in or location during the Holocaust. They situated their own cultural legacies in relation to our shared inquiry, and communicated across differences of race, age, ethnicity, social location, and power. Youth and teachers worked side-by-side to develop ideas for teaching Spiegelman's (1986) *Maus*, and coresearched that process. This involved multimodal and multimedia approaches to documenting their learning, such as the diorama we described previously. Along the way, teachers were able to engage directly with adolescents' literate abilities as authors, literary critics, activists, and researchers. For many participating teachers, collaborative inquiry expanded their conceptions of literacy, pedagogy, and adolescents' abilities to contribute to the research process. In the words of one participating teacher candidate, adolescents' contributions to this collaboration "exceeded my wildest expectations."

Our experience, however, was far from a storm-free process of meeting students' needs, or of seamlessly co-articulating our perspectives on teaching *Maus*. Youth and teachers expressed a range of emotional responses to the text and the practice of coresearching and coauthoring the curriculum. Sarah Evis, a teacher who partnered with Rob Simon to initiate this research between her middle school students and his teacher education students, shared how one student, Anne, had an "epiphany" about the Holocaust in the process of creating a painting with other adolescents in her group, based on their research with teachers. Drawing on visual motifs from Spiegelman's text, Anne and her collaborators depicted Jews as mice being led to the gas chamber (see Figure 23.2). In an analytic memo, Sarah wrote:

"Anne looked exhausted and close to tears. She said that she'd had a breakdown the night before. That was the word she used. (Interestingly, it works as a break in a barrier as well as an emotional event, but that's my observation). She said that it just hit her—her words I think—that it was all real. [Through the process of painting] . . . what had previously been abject, to protect herself emotionally, became real. . . .



FIGURE 23.2. Anne's painting.

I think that in a moment, at home the night before we talked, the safety of time and distance collapsed.”

This collapsing of “the safety of time and distance” signals what LaCapra (1998) has described as the complex process of *working through* responses to the Holocaust by means of inquiry. Scholars in trauma studies, as well as scholars in literacy, such as Elizabeth Dutro (2013), have noted the insufficiency of language to capture the meaning of traumatic experiences (p. 302). For Anne, as for many others in our community, teachers and students alike, painting her response to *Maus* broke down commonly oppositional stances—assuming critical distance on the one hand or developing deeply empathic connections with their object of inquiry on the other (LaCapra, 1998). The choices that Anne and her collaborators made in their artwork helped them to mark key ideational aspects of the text. When she presented her painting to the larger group, another student asked Anne why she chose to paint the bodies white, “as if they are taking off their skin.” Anne responded that she painted them white like the cats “to represent how [the Nazis] tried to reflect their image on other people.” She noted that “the dead bodies are supposed to be faceless and nameless, ’cause a lot of people don’t know what happened to their family,” which Anne regarded as one of the most terrifying and tragic results of the Holocaust.

For researchers, working through collaborative inquiry involves complex emotional, as well as intellectual, labor. Anne’s painting—along with collaborative textual responses made by other students, including research reports, oral presentations, artworks, websites, and videos—provides one example of what collaborative inquiries in adolescent literacy can offer. As we have highlighted throughout this chapter, these inquiries pay close attention to the cultural backgrounds of teachers and students, and the hermeneutic experiences they bring with them into the classroom (Simon & Campano, 2015). Individuals involved in collaborative projects come to regard adolescent literacy in broad terms and regard it as connected to students and teachers’ lives and histories; they consequently remain sensitive to the positionality of researchers, teachers, students, administrators, and others involved in these projects. In other words, they reflect on teachers’ legacies, students’ communities, and the sociopolitical neighborhoods to which they belong, would like to communicate with, or wish to challenge (Lytle, 2000).

For teachers, inquiry-based collaborations can invite more democratic relationships in classrooms. Collaborative research in adolescent literacy is commonly action oriented, as well as inquiry driven. As a result, adopting collaborative inquiry as a pedagogical practice can be a starting point for transforming educational conditions, particularly for students who are most alienated or marginalized in mainstream schooling. Such inquiries also provide a means for teachers and students' to explore their own belief systems and interactions with language and literature. This work often raises more questions than it answers. In this sense, as well as others, collaborative inquiry may run against the grain of educational policies oriented toward certainties, and may be more concerned with managing teaching and measuring individual students' performances by narrow benchmarks than with working from and cultivating more capacious views of learning or literacy. By contrast, inquiry-based collaborations in adolescent literacy classrooms can create hermeneutic spaces in which teachers can reread and rebuild their own textual legacies and make better sense of their students' literate lives.

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