

A Critical Inquiry Framework for K-12 Teachers

Lessons and Resources from the Rights of the Child

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*Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
“applies to all children, whatever their race, religion or abilities; whatever
they think or say whatever type of family they come from. It doesn’t matter
where children live, what language they speak, what their parents do,
whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is, whether they have
a disability or whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated
unfairly on any basis.”*

Flat Stanley (Brown, 1964) is a ubiquitous storybook character who is often “mailed” around the country to have adventures. The Flat Stanley Project (<http://www.flatstanley.com/about.php>) invites teachers to host Flat Stanley and to encourage their students to write Flat Stanley journals of his adventures. Students in 3rd-grade teacher Tonia Paramore’s classrooms had read the book and participated in the project for several years. But the year her class studied the UN Rights of the Child, Flat Stanley took on a very different role, that of a child with a disability who had rights.

CHRISTA: Everyone laughed at him and made fun of him.

DANIEL: You know, one of our rights is to be treated kindly, and Stanley didn’t have that right.

MAX: Yeah, he was different on the outside so people picked on him.

OSCAR: It wasn’t his fault. God made us that way.

MS. PARAMORE: What way?

OSCAR: We’re all different.

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KELLIE: But we all have feelings.

CHRISTA: We all have hearts.

MS. PARAMORE: Why do you think people were mean to Stanley?

YELITZA: Maybe they didn't have any reason. Sometimes people are bullies because something is wrong at home.

KELLIE: Stanley had a couple of disabilities. He was laughed at like some kids laugh at other kids with disabilities.

From this conversation, Tonia developed Critical Literacy Invitations (Van Sluys, 2005) as her students deepened their study of the Rights of the Child (Chapter 3, this volume). They engaged in social criticism, guided by their teacher who, like the other teachers in this book, sees it as her responsibility to prepare students to be active citizens who shape and participate in a democracy by developing students' abilities to critique social institutions and policies and to speak freely with evidence and insight in order to bring about a more just society.

The authors of *A Critical Inquiry Framework for K–12 Teachers*, elementary through high school teachers, believe in these rights and responsibilities. We formed a study group to discuss, implement, and critique critical pedagogy that honors student voices and engages students in critical inquiry into social issues relevant to their lives such as race, social class, language, and other aspects of citizenship in a democracy still under construction. Because we teach in schools where the majority of students are affected by poverty, we were particularly interested in critical inquiry into the complex relationships between literacy learning and social class.

Many educators who are drawn to critical pedagogy share a commitment to Freirian problem-posing, or critical inquiry. Much has been written about adopting a critical stance as a theoretical backbone, critical literacy as a specific application of critical stance, and posing critical questions to guide inquiry; we address each of these briefly in this chapter. There are outstanding published examples of critical pedagogy, e.g., in the journal *Rethinking Schools*, some of which we review in this chapter. What we felt a need for—and we suspect some other critical educators may seek—is a *critical content framework*, concrete subject matter in a cohesive structure that can serve as a basis for critical inquiry across disciplinary areas.

A CRITICAL CONTENT FRAMEWORK

Some teachers develop a commitment to critical pedagogy in their teacher education programs, from involvement in social action outside of schools, or from interacting with or reading the works of other critical educators (Ritchie, 2010). However, many of us struggle to teach in ways consistent with our beliefs. Where do we start? Seasoned critical educators help students examine their worlds critically, question textbooks and media, and inquire into power relations from

their earliest years in school (Cowhey, 2006; Vasquez, 2008) through high school (Christensen, 2000; Morrell, 2004) and college (Shor, 2009). There is a sense from reading some accounts of teaching for social justice that content frequently presents itself organically, that teachers will become adept at recognizing injustice and will be able to design inquiries around texts or events, and that students will raise critical questions and the curriculum will evolve with great passion and participation from students.

We believe all these things happen—just not all the time, just not quite so obviously, and just not in ways we can always tie into our increasingly mandated curriculum.

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate that a critical content framework such as the UN Rights of the Child is an invaluable resource for critical K–12 educators that does not replace an organic, response-to-injustice stance but complements it. We argue for both a critical content framework and the development of a pervasive classroom culture of critical inquiry. In our own classrooms, we were better able to develop our critical consciousness as well as critical curriculum repertoire by using the UN Rights of the Child to frame inquiries. We feel this framework may be useful to other teachers, especially those who have not engaged in critical inquiry previously. Further, as teachers and students develop a culture of critical inquiry, they may decide to connect issues that arise more organically from critical reading of texts and local events with specific Rights of the Child to provide a more global context.

Why did we adopt the Rights of the Child (ROC) as our framework? As we read and discussed examples of critical pedagogy, especially related to issues of inequities based on social class, we looked for ways we could make critical inquiry central to our teaching. We explored “broad themes” (Wade, 2007) and “enduring understandings” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005); however, we wanted an explicit focus on issues of power and social justice and a framework that could guide us across content areas, grade levels, and state standards. In the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (<http://www.unicef.org/crc/>), we found a critical content framework that met our criteria, one with a fascinating history of addressing human rights globally.

After the atrocities of World War II, as part of the creation of the United Nations, an international committee with members from various political, cultural, and religious backgrounds chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt wrote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to affirm that all human beings should be treated equally and with respect. The United Nations adopted the UDHR in 1948, and promoted its dissemination and discussion in schools. (The contents thereof can be found at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/history.shtml>)

However, many people saw the need for a specific treaty to protect the rights of children who in some societies were viewed as the property of their parents or government institutions (e.g., the military). Drawing on the UDHR and related human rights treaties (e.g., the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural

Rights), a UN committee proposed the Convention on the Rights of the Child in conjunction with the 1979 UN International Year of the Child. For the next 10 years, “governments, non-governmental organizations, human rights advocates, lawyers, health specialists, social workers, educators, child development experts and religious leaders from all over the world” created a universal set of standards “that takes into account the importance of tradition and cultural values for the protection and harmonious development of the child” (http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_30229.html).

The Articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provide positive statements of what a just society ensures for its children. The Articles directly address issues that critical educators often use as the basis for inquiry such as the right of the child to his or her views (Article 13) and the right to learn about and practice their own culture, language, and religion (Article 30). The UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child on November 20, 1989, and it became legally binding in September 1990. All countries have now ratified it except for Somalia and the United States (http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_30197.html).

Critical inquiry into the Rights of the Child (ROC) operated at two levels for us. First, the teachers in this book are all teacher consultants with the Red Clay Writing Project. We formed a study group that explored the ROC and became allies with our students in advocating for students’ own rights to free speech and to social criticism. One would think these would be inalienable rights, but there are countless examples to the contrary (Apple, 2009). Second, our students studied the rights of children as set forth in the Articles of the Rights of the Child as integral parts of the language arts and social studies curriculum standards. In this book we 1) demonstrate the applicability for critical educators of a critical content framework; 2) offer invitations to seven classroom inquiries based on pertinent Articles in the Right of the Child (see Table 1.1 at the end of the chapter); 3) detail adaptable processes for engaging students and families in critical inquiry; and 4) provide an extensive annotated bibliography of children’s literature that can support critical inquiry.

In this chapter, we’ll explain what “critical inquiry” came to mean for us and for our students in terms of critical stance, critical literacy, and critical questioning. We’ll share the influence of critical researchers and educators who focused us on literacy and social class, and the story of how Rebecca Williams Wall and her students led us to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Finally, in the spirit of examining multiple perspectives, we address some of the controversy surrounding the Rights of the Child.

CRITICAL INQUIRY

The critical teacher does the same as the progressive teacher—but more. The [critical] teacher uses the food drive as the basis for a discussion about poverty and hunger. How much poverty and hunger is there in

our neighborhood? Our country? Our world? . . . What is the role of the government in making sure people have enough to eat? (Bob Peterson, 5th-grade teacher, 2007)

Peterson and his colleagues who write for *Rethinking Schools* adopt a “questioning/problem-posing approach” (p. 30) to education, as advocated by Paulo Freire (1970). This approach, also known as critical inquiry, includes taking a critical stance, engaging in critical literacy, and asking critical questions.

Critical Stance

In his fourth letter to teachers as cultural workers, “On the Indispensable Qualities of Progressive Teachers for their Better Performance,” Freire (1998) explored the creative tensions, or dialectics, involved in being a progressive/critical educator. Such teachers must demonstrate both humility and self-confidence. As they take risks, they acknowledge fear and show courage, because “there may be fear without courage . . . [but] there may never be courage without fear” (p. 41). Critical educators also experience a constant tension between patience, which by itself could lead to resignation and immobility, and impatience that could “lead the educator to blind activism, to action for its own sake” (Freire, 1998, p. 44).

We have experienced each of these tensions as striving critical educators, but perhaps no dialectic is as troubling as the tension between taking an open, inquiring stance and bringing a critical perspective to bear on social issue. We constantly wrestle with following our students’ leads and leading our students’ critique. Freire recognized that critical teachers investigate and question, along with their students, but they are also decisive because “indecision is perceived by learners as either moral weakness or professional incompetence” (Freire, 1998, p. 43). As bell hooks noted,

When we try to change the classroom so that there is a sense of mutual responsibility for learning, students get scared that you are now not the captain working with them, but that you are after all just another crew member—and not a reliable one at that. (hooks, 1994, p.144)

As you read these chapters, you’ll have to decide where you would have been more or less decisive, where you might have steered the ship in a different direction—or not at all.

Freire (1998) believed that decisiveness and confidence come from “political clarity, and ethical integrity” (p. 43). Many of us throughout the Rights of the Child project turned to Paulo Freire to sharpen our political clarity, and to test our ethical integrity. In our relationships with students, Freire urged us to testify to “our constant commitment to justice, liberty, and individual rights, of our dedication to defending the weakest when they are subjected to the exploitation

of the strongest” (p. 56). We struggled to address the dialectic tensions through dialogue, to make clear to our students that through dialogue and learning another person or group’s perspective, “changing one’s position is legitimate” (Freire, 1998, p. 56).

One aspect of our stance as critical educators is our use of language, especially the language of schooling. Educational language constantly needs to be interrogated and “refocused” on terms that do not denigrate students or their families or absolve schools from their responsibility to teach (Fennimore, 2000). We agree with Fennimore’s admonition that “talk matters,” and with her we continue (not always successfully) to ask these critical questions: “How might a balance be achieved between an honest acknowledgment of children’s problems and a determined vision of their present and future possibilities” so that teachers can be “*advocates* who use their knowledge and experience to build political support for improved child and family policies” (Fennimore, p. 7)? How do we talk about poverty, disability, immigration issues, and other social conditions and constructions as advocates? Our hearts were willing, but at times our vocabularies were weak as we tried to eliminate deficit language and thinking during the years we met as a study group.

In all honesty, some of this language restructuring occurred during the writing and rewriting of this book. Fennimore (2000) offered guidelines that we found most helpful in restructuring our language.

Is the information couched in terms of respect for children and responsibility to do all that is possible for them, or is it couched in terms of a sense of hopelessness and a lack of professional accountability? *How* are challenges or deficiencies explained and described, *why* are some children rather than others consistently engulfed in an impersonal cloud of negativity (such as children who are poor), and what happens when deficit-based descriptions carry unfair generalities that lead to the assumption of inferiority and school failure? (pp. 7–8)

You will note different, seemingly conflicting, terms at times. For example, we adopt the term *Latin@*. Wallerstein (2005) noted that the use of *Latin@* creates a non-sexist term, since *Latino* and *Latina* are gendered. *Latin@s* refers to “those who come from and identify themselves with the countries of what is today called Latin America” as well as to “those within the United States who are descended from the first group” (Wallerstein, p. 31). We use it where we can; however, when groups named themselves (e.g., Latinos for Involvement in Family Education), we honored that choice. With our focus on social class inequities, we struggled throughout the book to talk about the impact of poverty in ways that respect students and families, that are not overgeneralized and deterministic, and that acknowledge the strengths and agency of students and families who have been affected by poverty.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy, which undergirds the critical inquiries in our Rights of the Child work, is a central curricular manifestation of critical pedagogy. Reading and writing must be for “something that children need and that we too need,” noted Freire (1998, p. 24); literacy must be meaningful to students and serve a purpose in their lives. Maureen McLaughlin and Glenn L. DeVoogd (2004) drew on the work of Paulo Freire to define critical literacy, arguing that critical literacy

is not a teaching method but a way of thinking and a way of being that challenges texts and life as we know it. Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action. It encourages readers to be active participants in the reading process: to question, to dispute, and to examine power relations. (p. 150)

If that is what critical literacy does, what do critical teachers do to foster its development? Critical educator Maria Sweeney (1999) supplies teacher action verbs:

I strive to create a classroom atmosphere and curriculum that prepares my students to build and participate in critical democracy. I help my students gain the necessary skills and knowledge to critique their world, unveil injustices and needless suffering, and work for social change. I nurture a strong sense of compassion and equity, and I urge children to get angry and do something. (p. 97)

The emphasis on doing something is echoed in “reading and writing for social action,” the subtitle of Randy Bomer and Katherine Bomer’s *For a Better World* (2001). They stress that social action must be grounded in students’ lives. Students in Katherine’s elementary classroom develop a critical discourse and social justice concepts as readers. Through independent reading, “reading clubs,” and “critical conversations” of texts Katherine reads aloud, students learn how to analyze and discuss issues of fairness/justice, voice/silence, multiple perspectives, representation, gender, race, class, money, labor, language, intimate relationships and families, nature, violence and peace, and individualism/collectivism.

Critiquing the ills of society can be paralyzing and depressing if students (or adults) feel impotent. Katherine Bomer teaches students to move toward social action by creating coalitions of others interested in their inquiry topics (generated from their writing notebooks, including “think pieces” on current issues). These teams learn from texts, mentors, parents, community members, and older students in related organizations. They develop social action plans and write persuasive letters, petitions, and other texts specific to the audience and purpose of persuasion.

You will see some of these critical literacy practices throughout this book.

Critical Questions

Teachers who take a critical perspective encourage students to go beyond the words on the page (or the Internet). As students inquire into topics and read, view, or write texts, critical educators equip them to question and evaluate, pushing toward deeper levels of understanding. Students discuss power structures related to issues that directly affect them, their families, and their communities: race, social class, sexual orientation, gender, language, religion, family structures, ability, and many other cultural constructs.

Maria Sweeney challenged her 4th-grade students to confront inequities and work toward a more just and democratic society by teaching them to consider alternative viewpoints in the texts they read and wrote. She taught her students to ask questions—to engage in critical inquiry—in all kinds of texts: children’s literature, events they observed, various media, and textbooks (Sweeney, 1999, p. 97):

Is this fair?
 Is this right?
 Does this hurt anyone?
 Is this the whole story?
 Who benefits and who suffers?
 Why is it like this?
 How could it be different, more just?

Similarly, in his analysis and critique of American high school history textbooks, *Lies My Teacher Taught Me*, James Loewen (1995) also emphasized the importance of students and teachers asking critical questions of all texts:

“[W]hose viewpoint is presented? . . . What interests, material or ideological, does the statement serve? Whose viewpoints are omitted? . . . [I]s the account believable? . . . [I]s the account backed up by other sources?

[H]ow is one supposed to feel about the America that has been presented?”

(p. 317)

Freire (1998) stressed, “The teacher becomes a role model setting forth the values of democracy” (p. 8). Students have many questions of their own, many of them critical. However, they may have learned that such questions are not always welcomed in schools. We as critical educators must be role models, showing students that asking critical questions is central to the values of democracy, and critical in examining the universal Rights of the Child.

Many educators who are drawn to critical pedagogy share our commitment to this questioning/problem-posing inquiry education: critical stance as a theoretical

backbone, critical literacy as a specific application of critical stance, critical questions to guide inquiry. Teachers have learned from outstanding published examples of critical pedagogy, some of which we illuminate in the next section. Yet some of us are unsure of ourselves in identifying issues, others in feeling like we can (or should) lead students in the “right” critique, and still others struggle with prioritizing issues in relation to content in textbooks and state standards. In the *Rights of the Child*, we found a critical content framework rich with global implications and ripe for local action.

CRITICAL INQUIRY THROUGH THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Our inquiry began as a study group, part of the National Writing Project’s funding of local writing projects to work with teachers of students from communities affected by poverty: Project Outreach. Over half of the authors of this book teach in a county where the poverty rate was over 30% at the time we wrote, the fifth worst rate in the country for counties with populations greater than 100,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The other authors teach in rural counties affected by poverty. The NWP grant was for 3 years; the impact on our thinking, writing, and teaching lasted far beyond the funding.

Phase 1: Studying Literacy and Social Class

For the first year, the Red Clay Project Outreach study group read a wide range of education and popular-press literature on the relation between learning and social class. Insights about the complexities of American social class differences came from Alex Kotlowitz (1992) and Jonathan Kozol (1992, 1996, 2006). We walked in the thin shoes of a minimum-wage worker with Barbara Ehrenreich (2002). Likewise, David Shipler’s (2005) analysis of interviews with *The Working Poor* helped us understand the “both/and” rather than the “either/or” of social and personal responsibility.

From these sociological and journalistic views of poverty, we moved to scholars who analyzed and illuminated social class policy (Berliner, 2006) and investigated the impact of class related to language and literacy differences between home and school (Heath, 1983) and to how families view parenting and interact with schools (Lareau, 2000, 2003). We learned from bell hooks’s (2000) insights from her upbringing and education in a working-class family and her insistence that “class matters” and cannot be separated from the gendered and racialized natures of poverty.

Most of us had previously read Ruby Payne’s (1998) *Framework for Understanding Poverty* and/or attended school-district in-services led by her ubiquitous corporate trainers. We were troubled by gross generalizations about people

affected by poverty, the lack of research, and what struck us as overt commercialization. However, it was not until we read Ng and Rury's (2006) critique and Gorski's class-based analysis (2007) that we had a deep understanding of the flaws in Payne's framework. Ng and Rury argued that, among other things, Payne stereotypes and essentializes the poor, and ignores social science research that suggests that many of the attitudes that Payne attributes to the poor are also evident to varying degrees among non-poor groups who are not as likely to suffer as a result of similar behaviors because they have more monetary resources. Gorski used a critical social theory lens to develop three main shortcomings: Payne's failure to consider class inequities, her deficit perspective, and her conservative values. Detailing how Payne ignored the responsibility of social institutions for creating economic inequities, Gorski argued,

Payne protects our privilege and gives us permission to do the same. . . . [W]e can not secure equity and justice if we do not authentically confront inequity and injustice. . . . [A] genuine framework for understanding poverty prepares us to be change agents. . . . (p. 19)

After reading Payne's response to Gorski, his critique and rejoinder still resonated with our experiences teaching students affected by poverty.

As is evident throughout this book, Paulo Freire (1970, 1994) provided our theoretical anchor and educational/ethical compass. Gonzáles, Moll, and Amanti (2005) debunked the deficit myth and helped us focus on the funds of knowledge children bring to school from their families, including environmental knowledge, life-skills, additional languages and/or dialects, interpersonal relationship skills, and other information children learn in homes and communities. Freire and Gonzáles et al. led us to other critical educators and empowering practices that allow children to develop their own approach to dealing with social issues in their communities. We began reading the work of critical educators specific to our grade level and teaching situations. Colleagues in the National Writing Project (2006) employed critical literacy, including useful protocols for democratic discussion to promote social action. *Rethinking Schools* and collections of *Rethinking Our Classrooms* (1994, 2001) provided multiple, detailed classroom examples.

At the elementary level, Cathy Compton-Lilly (2004) detailed what happened when children examined the power relationships in their own lives and how they learned to interrogate and dispel myths related to living in poverty. Stephanie Jones (2006) helped us recognize, deconstruct, and reconstruct schooling practices. She wrote not only about but from a working-class culture that is at best marginalized and at worst maligned in schools. She recounted how her students connected—and disconnected—with children's literature and celebrated their writing about the windows of their worlds. In Vivian Vasquez's multiethnic classroom, 3- to 5-year-old students raised questions from the storybooks Vasquez read

to them, things they heard about on television, or conversations at home. They tackled school (who is left out of the books in our library?), community (how do people become disadvantaged?), and global issues including saving the rain forest. Vasquez invited parental perspectives through three “open dialogue nights.” For primary grades teacher Mary Cowhey (2006), the social justice curriculum generated by both her and her students *is* the curriculum, all day, every day; for example, critical questions Cowhey and her students raised about the school-sponsored food drive led to inquiry and action into local poverty and homelessness, similar to Bob Peterson and his 5th-grade students (2007).

At the secondary level, Bill Bigelow and his colleagues and contributors at the journal *Rethinking Schools* and their book *Rethinking Our Classrooms* (Au, Bigelow, & Karp, 2007) provided in-depth classroom accounts of critical pedagogy across the curriculum. Linda Christensen (2000) took us into her high school classroom with vivid examples of critical pedagogy, discussions, and writing by students examining their own lives and the social issues that impacted them most directly. Ernest Morrell (2004) taught in a summer program for urban Los Angeles youth who had not always been successful during the academic year. Yet Morrell and his colleagues engaged these students in reading critical theory; learning research techniques including interviewing, videotaping, and Internet research; and documenting issues in their community that directly affected their lives. They confidently presented to university faculty, lawmakers, and others in their community.

We were inspired. We were ready. Rebeccah led the way.

Phase 2: Focusing on the Rights of the Child

“We can make a difference if we are vigilant to create a new kind of society, more compassionate, more caring, more sharing where human rights, where children’s rights, are respected and protected.” (Archbishop Desmond Tutu, foreword in UNICEF, 2001)

In the midst of our discussions about critical pedagogy related to social class, Rebeccah Williams Wall, a Title 1 2nd-grade teacher in our study group, came to one of our meetings excited about an inquiry she and her students were doing on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. She recounts her class’s story in this section.

My students and I began by discussing and defining “rights.” It was harder than I thought to explain in 2nd-grade lingo. I needed a way to develop the abstract concepts in children’s terms, so we read *Universal Declaration of Human Rights: An Adaptation for Children* by Ruth Rocha and Otavio Roth (2000). This picture book presents the essence of the UN Declaration of Human Rights on which the Rights of the Child is modeled. In simple language, with vivid illustrations by Brazilian artist Otavio Roth, the authors made each article more concrete. For example,

Rocha and Roth translated Article 1 into child-friendly language: “All people are born free. All people are born equal and so have equal rights. People can think for themselves and understand what is going on around them. Everyone should act as brothers and sisters.”

We moved from these human rights to discuss the rights of children. The students generated a chart of the rights of children that they believed were most important.

All children should have the right to:

- home/shelter
- clothes
- food
- to play
- to be healthy
- to have a family
- to be safe (in body, mind, and spirit)
- to be well treated, loved, and taken care of
- to learn
- to have books
- to learn to read
- to go to school

We expanded some of the initial ideas through discussion; for example, I asked students what they meant by “safety” and we talked about safety of body, mind, and spirit. I was very excited that they came up with many ideas on their own, such as having books, learning, and the right to have a family. Next, they grouped these into broad categories; for example, the last four on the list they grouped under “the right to education.”

Students then took a survey developed by the Minnesota Human Rights Resource Center, Taking Human Rights Temperature of Your Classroom (<http://www.hrusa.org/thisismyhome/project/documents/HRTEMP5-10SURVEY.pdf>). The survey included 10 statements to ponder, including:

1. At my school, students are safe.
2. People at school are treated the same no matter what they wear, who they hang out with, or what they like to do.
3. Students at my school do not allow mean actions or bad words in the school.

Students responded to each statement by circling a happy, neutral, or sad face. Most of my students circled happy faces. I wanted to help students think beyond our school. I prompted, “We may have things like free education, but some

children don't in other parts of the world. Let's look at each of the rights on our chart and ask, 'What makes it hard to . . . ' like, 'What makes it hard to learn to read, to be healthy, etc.?' The students struggled with pushing the inquiry to this critical level. We needed another concrete example.

To help them "see" the rights of the child, we read *For Every Child: The Rights of the Child in Words and Pictures* (Castle, 2001). We read the foreword by Bishop Desmond Tutu, including the quote that opens this section. Students loved the brilliant illustration by international children's book illustrators such as Rachel Isadora, Claudio Muñoz, and Jerry Pinkney. The book includes the original ROC wording and rewording from a child's perspective of 14 of the most salient articles. For example,

"Allow us to tell you what we are thinking or feeling" (Article 13).

"If we are disabled . . . treasure us especially and give us . . . care" (Article 23).

"Teach us all to read and write . . ." (Articles 28 and 29).

"In times of war . . . shelter us and protect us from all harm" (Article 38).

Now my 2nd-graders took off, discussing text and illustrations, asking questions, and making connections to the chart of rights they had generated. They were so proud to see that they had identified several of the UN rights. They decided to focus on Article 29, Aims of Education, because it included so many rights they had identified.

Children's education should

1. Develop each child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
2. Encourage children to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms;
3. Develop respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language, and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
4. Prepare the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national, and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
5. Teach how to respect the natural environment.

Rebeccah's accounting of how she engaged her students in this critical inquiry had a profound effect on us. We had found a critical content framework, a set of moral principles deep enough to engage students in studying the issues of their lives. Although Rebeccah moved and was not able to continue in the study group, the Rights of the Child provided a rich context for the rest of us to teach not only

the required curriculum standards, but also the foundations of citizenship in a just and democratic society. And in a democracy, all people have a right to be heard, so in the next section, we share the opinions of some who disagree.

NOT WITHOUT CONTROVERSY

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child continues to generate controversy and opposition in the United States. Critics say the treaty, which creates “the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” and outlaws the “arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy,” intrudes on the family and strips parents of the power to raise their children without government interference (Joseph Abrams, Fox News.com, February 25, 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/02/25/boxer-seeks-ratify-treaty-erode-rights/>). Steven Groves, a fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, warned, “To the extent that an outside body, a group of unaccountable so-called experts in Switzerland have a say over how children in America should be raised, educated and disciplined—that is an erosion of American sovereignty” (Abrams, 2009).

Another group opposing ratification is Parental Rights (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2009), which calls this “a new level of intrusion” and “silencing a parent’s voice.” This group cites two core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the “best interests of the child” and the child’s “evolving capacities,” that could result in government intrusion on decisions parents make. They argued that “all decisions affecting the child . . . are now suspect and can be overruled if they do not satisfy these two principles.”

Some parents who home-school their children also actively oppose ratification. Michael Smith, president of the Home School Legal Defense Association, fears that parental rights would be threatened if countries adhered to the principles that “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” and that “nations should ensure that children are capable of expressing their views freely in all matters affecting them, giving due weight to the age and maturity of the child.” Smith wrote,

This is contrary to traditional American law, which provides that absent proof of harm, courts and social workers simply do not have the authority to intervene in parent-child relationships and decision-making. . . . The international committee in Geneva, in reviewing the laws of practice of countries that have ratified the CRC, has expressed its concern that parents could home-school without the view of the child being considered; that parents could remove their children from sex-education classes without the view of the child being considered; that parents were legally permitted

to use corporal punishment; and that children didn't have access to reproductive health information without parental knowledge. (<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jan/11/un-treaty-might-weaken-families/>)

These concerns are raised by parents who care deeply about the education and welfare of their children. We believe they should be part of the ongoing dialogue about the Rights of the Child. As you read the remaining chapters of the book, we encourage you to keep these concerns in mind, and to critique our teaching through this parental lens, knowing that there are many other parents who applaud critical inquiry into the rights of the child. We were fortunate to have broad parental support in each of our inquiries, as you will read.

The invitation to dialogue is one you will find in various forms throughout this book. In the next section, we explain how we invited students—and how we invite you—into critical inquiry through the Rights of the Child.

INVITATIONS TO CRITICAL INQUIRY

“Together, critically literate people can imagine and create a better world.”
(Van Sluys, 2005, p. 134)

Each chapter in this book opens with an invitation. Critical invitations, as defined by Katie Van Sluys (2005), have nine interrelated properties. These properties align well with our intentions—which, of course, are not always the same as how our practice played out—in the Rights of the Child units. Critical invitations

1. occur in social learning environments
2. focus on making meaning around experience
3. welcome varied experiences, languages, and resources
4. represent our best current understandings
5. embrace opportunities to use multiple ways of knowing to construct and contest meaning
6. value alternative responses
7. promote the social aspects of learning by taking up issues in students' lives and placing inquiries within social contexts
8. encourage practices that reach across all dimensions of critical literacy
9. invite further inquiry.

Invitations for exploring *Critical Inquiry through the Rights of the Child* include the following sections, based on the format for critical invitations (Van Sluys, 2005):

1. Initiating experience: need for the inquiry.
2. Invitation to inquire: authors invite you to think, explore, challenge, collaborate
3. Suggested questions: connect, disconnect, question, adapt, expand, and act
4. Texts, tools, and resources: including which Articles of the Rights of the Child are addressed

We invite you to explore, connect with, critique, and challenge us as you respond to these invitations. We hope that our chapters promote learning related to your students' lives, encourage critical literacy, and invite further inquiry.

Just as some of us issued multiple invitations to our students, we offer you the opportunity to read the chapters that are of most interest to you. Readers often look first for grade level or school type (all our schools receive Title 1 funding) connections. You may also want to explore intriguing content or teaching dilemmas. Table 1.1 provides information on grade levels, school populations, and the rights being addressed.

THE CHALLENGE OF CRITICAL INQUIRY

“Students of all ages need adult coalitions to help them win language rights to free speech and to social criticism” (Shor, 2009, p. 284): We are the adults. “We are the ones we have been waiting for,” to quote June Jordan (1980). Our hope is that the chapters in this book will raise questions, generate divergent perspectives, and spark your own inquiries.

The stakes are high, for our students, our communities, and our world.
 The more we respect students independently
 of their color, sex, or social class,
 the more testimony we will give
 of respect in our daily lives, in school,
 in our relationship with colleagues,
 with doormen, with cooks, with watchmen,
 with students' mothers and fathers,
 the more we lessen the distance between what we say and what we do,
 so much more will we be contributing
 toward the strengthening of democratic experiences. . . .

(Freire, 1998, p. 90)

Table 1.1. Chapters, Grade, and School Demographics, and Rights Being Addressed

Chapter	Grade(s), School Demographics	Primary Articles of UN Rights of Child Addressed
<p>2. Poverty, Power, & Action: A Primary Grades Study of the Right to Health and Well-Being</p>	<p><i>1st and 2nd Latin@ (Mexican, El Salvadorian, Costa Rican) and African American. Small city urban.</i></p>	<p>Article 12: <i>Respect for views</i>. Children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account. Article 17: <i>Access to information</i>. Children have the right to get information that is important to their health and well-being. Article 24: <i>Health</i>. Children have the right . . . to safe drinking water, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment. . . . Article 27: <i>Adequate standard of living</i>. Children have the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs.</p>
<p>3. It's Not Easy Being Flat: A 3rd-Grade Study of the Rights of Students with Disabilities</p>	<p><i>3rd European American, El Salvador, Mexico, the Philippines, and West Africa. Rural.</i></p>	<p>Article 23: <i>Children with disabilities</i>. Children who have any kind of disability have the right to special care and support, as well as all the rights in the Convention.</p>
<p>4. Latinos for Involvement in Family Education: Parents Promoting Educational Goals That Respect Their Values and Culture</p>	<p><i>K-5 6% Latin@ parents in 94% European American school. Rural.</i></p>	<p>Article 29: <i>Goals of education</i>. . . . Education should aim to develop respect for the values and culture of their parents. Article 17: <i>Access to information</i>. Increase access to information . . . in languages that minority and indigenous children can understand. Children should also have access to children's books.</p>

continued

Table 1.1. (continued)

Chapter	Grade(s), School Demographics	Primary Articles of UN Rights of Child Addressed
<p>5. Protection from Deportation and Family Separation: Middle School Students Explore Their Rights as Recent Immigrants</p>	<p><i>7th and 8th</i> Recent immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Bolivia. Small city urban.</p>	<p>Article 10: <i>Family reunification</i>. Families whose members live in different countries should be allowed to move between those countries so that parents and children can stay in contact, or get back together as a family.</p>
<p>6. “I Need a New Way of Lyfe”: High School English Students Inquire into the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living</p>	<p><i>10th-grade literature collaborative class</i> African American, Mexican and Cuban American, European American. Small city urban.</p>	<p>Article 27: <i>Adequate standard of living</i>. Children have the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs. Article 28: <i>Education</i>. Young people should be encouraged to reach the highest level of education of which they are capable.</p>
<p>7. Becoming Thrice Born: 10th-Grade History Students Inquire into the Rights to Culture, Identity, and Freedom of Thought</p>	<p><i>10th-grade U.S. History</i> European American, Laos, Moldova, Turkey, South and Central America. Exurban/rural.</p>	<p>Article 8: <i>Preservation of identity</i>. Children have the right to an identity. . . . Article 13: <i>Freedom of expression</i>. The child has the right to express his or her views including the right to share information in any way they choose. . . . Article 14: <i>Freedom of thought, conscience and religion</i>. Children have the right to examine their beliefs . . . [with] respect for the rights and freedoms of others.</p>

Chapter	Grade(s), School Demographics	Primary Articles of UN Rights of Child Addressed
8. PeaceJam: High School Student Activists Work for Peace and Justice	9th–12th students in afterschool club and/or elective class European American, African American, multiracial, Polynesian, students from India and Central and Latin America. Small city urban.	<p>Article 2: <i>Non-discrimination</i>. Children should not be discriminated against because of their race, religion, or abilities; beliefs or self-expression; or type of family they come from.</p> <p>Article 19: <i>Protection from all forms of violence</i>. Young people have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, physically or mentally.</p> <p>Article 24: <i>Health and health services</i>. Children have the right to good quality health care . . . and to safe drinking water, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment, and information to help them stay healthy.</p> <p>Article 28: <i>Education</i>. Young people should be encouraged to reach the highest level of education of which they are capable.</p> <p>Article 30: <i>Children of minorities/indigenous groups</i>. They have the right to learn about and practice their own culture, language and religion.</p>
9. Literature as a Springboard for Critical Inquiry: An Annotated Bibliography		<p>Article 17: <i>Access to information</i>. Children have the right to get information that is important to their health and well-being. . . . Children should also have access to children's books.</p>