

## Creating Connectional and Critical Curriculum

In this chapter we discuss what we learned from families and how family funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) became central to our curriculum. This is what we call creating a *connectional curriculum*, practices that link classroom learning with families and communities (Allen, 2007). We are not referring to parents helping with a sheet of math homework or signing agendas or reading logs. Connectional curriculum grows out of what we learn from families about their experiences, jobs, histories, and opinions, as we illustrate in this chapter.

In addition, many of us began using FDJs in our classrooms because we sought a *critical curriculum*, one in which dialogue supports the questioning of dominant cultural practices that oppress others while encouraging social action (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). We had in common years of Red Clay Writing Project (RCWP) experiences of discussing the power and privilege differentials students and families experience based on race, social class, gender, and other cultural constructs. Central to all our shared activities in RCWP is the following RCWP tenet:

We see literacy as deeply integral to developing teaching/learning relationships that addresses *issues of educational equity and social justice*. Using this critical lens helps us think about how to prepare students to participate as citizens working towards a truly democratic society. As the United States grows more diverse, issues of language, literacy, and culture become increasingly critical. Living by democratic principles has become more complicated and threatened in recent years, and the existential, political, and social needs for literacy have grown geometrically, especially for those students disenfranchised from the mainstream. We view literacy not only as a tool for learning or means of enjoyment, but also as a way to actively participate in and shape a democracy.

As critical educators, we believed that including families in discussion through Family Dialogue Journals would encourage students and families

to question the world and even their own ideologies. Therefore, many of the journal entries invited students, families, and us to reflect on social issues and inequities. In the following sections we offer examples of how we moved towards a connectional and critical curriculum, one that incorporated family funds of knowledge and that engaged students, families, and teachers in critique of society, education, and our lives.

## INCORPORATING FAMILY FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

The primary purpose of the Family Dialogue Journals was to incorporate students' home lives into the classroom. Weaving family funds of knowledge into the curriculum not only created a bridge between in-school and out-of-school lives; it also validated students' household knowledge and ways of learning. We tried to incorporate families' funds of knowledge into the classroom in various ways. Often, this depended on the grade level and subject matter being discussed. In this section we show how Elyse, Stephanie, and Jen incorporated funds of knowledge into their elementary school classes differently from how Amber, a high school teacher, integrated them into her classroom. Despite the difference, the value of family knowledge resulted in a more dynamic curriculum and supported student learning.

### Using Family Knowledge to Build Community

One of Stephanie's favorite ways to build community in her classroom at the beginning of each year was to engage in a study of names. She read aloud *The Old Woman Who Named Things* (Rylant, 2000), *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2003), and *Chrysanthemum* (Henkes, 2008) to begin their inquiry about names. This usually made the students wonder where their names originated; naming is often linked to family histories and social networks. So in their journals they told their families about the stories they had been reading and asked them, "How did you choose my name?" Because the students were dying to know the answer and were equally excited to share their name story, the Morning Meeting sharing of this entry was particularly engaging and helped to lay a foundation for sharing all year.

Olivia's parents told her that her name "came from an old lady at the nursing home your Granny worked at." Treasure's mom responded:

When it was time to name you, I searched and searched for the perfect name. I wanted your name to be so unique that no one else would have that name. So, I picked Treasure for your name. It was a one-of-a-kind name, and it described what you are to me . . . my Treasure!

Stephanie also had one student, Alisa, who spelled her name differently from what was on the school roster. Despite the fact that she knew Alisa was a strong reader, Stephanie thought initially that she was misspelling her name. Alisa emigrated from Mexico and when she came to public school in America, her mom decided to change the spelling of her original name, Asalia, to the “American” spelling, Alisa. Through the name-story entry in the family journals, Stephanie realized that this student did know how to spell her name, she was just spelling it the way her mother spelled it at home as opposed to the school spelling. From that point on, Stephanie made a conscious effort to spell her name the way she and her mother spelled it. Another student’s mother emphasized the apostrophe that she placed in her daughter’s name and while many of the school records left out the apostrophe in D’Nisha, because of the entry from her mother, Stephanie made sure to include the apostrophe.

In this way, the journals gave Stephanie valuable knowledge, not only about her students’ writing abilities early in the year, but also about their preferences with regard to their names. The journal dialogue ensured that the most important proper noun in the English language—one’s name—was spelled and pronounced correctly and linked those names to family stories, traditions, and relationships.

### **Connecting Curriculum to FDJ Entries**

As winter warmed into spring, Elyse’s kindergarten class asked their families, “Why do you like spring?” Several families responded about spending time outside, and a few families responded about the gardens they were planting. The students beamed with connections, realizing that they, too, loved going to the lake or helping their mom or dad plant flowers and vegetables. The following week, the class focused on nutrition. As students identified and named healthy food choices, Elyse connected the class discussion to the vegetables mentioned in journals the previous week, making the subject matter more personally relevant and memorable.

Connecting journal conversations to new classroom content evolved from a practice that the teacher modeled into a student norm. The following journal entry told about the flowers students had planted in the classroom. The students talked about what their plants needed and asked, “What do you need?” Parents wrote about a variety of needs, such as water, food, and love. As the class began their living and nonliving science unit, students eagerly called out connections. “We wrote about that!” “Like our plants.” “My mom needs water [to live].” Students began to reference their journal entries and family responses when they were relevant to class discussions.

In Jennifer’s 2nd grade, they were studying temperature. Elizabeth’s dad noticed that she was watching the weather news at home. Elizabeth wrote,

We have been Leaning about temperature. Do you have a thermometer?

Elizabeth: I saw you Paying attention to the TV the Past few Days and watching close all the temperature in the weather News

- We do Have thermomoters at home as a matter of fact we Have a few diferent kinds
- We Have one that we use for you when you are sick to make sure you don't Have fever.
- We Have one that measure the temperature in the House
- and we Have the ones Daddy use in His Job

Love always,  
Daddy

Family Dialogue Journals also served as a way to inform teachers about students' academic interests and led to the creation of new projects or altered curriculum. For example, in January, one of Stephanie's new students, J'Don, really enjoyed the science unit about heat, especially heat produced from the sun. In his journal he asked his dad, "Did you learn about the sun as a kid?" His father replied, "I also learned about the sun when I was in school. I learned that the sun is a star and other stars that we see in the sky at night are also other suns in other galaxies." J'Don became even more interested in learning about the sun after his father's response. After he shared the entry during Morning Meeting, the other students also volunteered information they knew concerning the sun and surrounding planets. This discussion enraptured the class in a 30-minute

#### **FDJ ENTRIES ON ESTABLISHED CLASSROOM CURRICULUM**

- What do you predict I will be when I grow up? (Elyse's classroom)
- What do you know about/how do you celebrate Earth Day? (Elyse's classroom)
- When is satire appropriate, and when is it offensive? (Amber's classroom)
- Can you show me how you would solve 59 divided by 4? (Stephanie's classroom)
- Where on the map did your family stories take place? (Jen's classroom)
- Have you ever written poetry? (Jennifer's classroom)
- What do you remember us learning about over the past year or 2 years? (Jen's classroom)

discussion with the students asking questions and sharing their own and their families' knowledge about the sun.

This discussion led them to a science inquiry project that allowed the students to practice their research inquiry and writing skills. They all completed a solar system project that they researched, designed, and presented to the class. This project originated because families shared their knowledge in the journals. How often do we miss opportunities to bring in family knowledge to shape and enrich our curriculum?

Student and parent responses also inspired Amber to alter her curriculum, sometimes immediately, to capitalize on students' interests and, at other times, to address more drastic changes for the next semester or even the next year. In some cases, family entries inspired her to create a new lesson or project. In other instances, the information in the journals made Amber reassess major elements of her curriculum, such as the novels that the class would read the following year. In both cases, the dialogue between the student, family, and Amber influenced her instructional practices, bringing the family permanently into her classroom as they helped build her instructional calendar.

One assignment in Amber's classroom that sprang from the dialogue in the FDJs revolved around formal language versus street or slang language. The students wanted to write about their favorite slang words, which morphed into a question about favorite slang, dialect, and academic words. So, capitalizing on their excitement, Amber transitioned into the next unit, *Othello*, by having students experiment with using Shakespearian slang and proper Elizabethan language, showing how language has been coded since before the 1600s. Using a list of words to insult an enemy, Amber's students reveled in calling each other "fobby beef-witted harpies" and "gorbellied onion-eyed hugger-muggers." Next, students tried to translate Shakespearian slang into the slang that they would use today. Amber then gave them a list of words that were used in formal Elizabethan language, and students translated modern sentences into Shakespearian sentences, focusing on *thee* and *thou* and *wither* and *whilst*, and so on. Then students talked about situations in the play where slang or formal language would be used and by whom. This led to a discussion about the power of language and how Shakespeare used language registers to identify the class of a character. Amber changed the introduction to her Shakespeare unit to take advantage of the interests her students conveyed in their FDJs.

Amber also found that the FDJs helped her make long-term changes to her curriculum. At the end of the first semester, Amber asked students to assess their progress in the course and share what they would like to see changed. Many students shared what they perceived as weaknesses in their language arts skills, and parents also mentioned places where they thought their child could improve. For example, after pointing out his strengths, Rajak's mother wrote that he "needs to get more organized and work on his analytical skills," while Rajak felt that his weakness was "time management

while taking multiple choice tests” like the timed, multiple-choice AP exam. By attending to his anxiety, Amber was able to alleviate Rajak’s fears and, as it turned out, the anxiety of many of the other students, by working in some timed, multiple-choice practice sessions. Furthermore, Amber assured his mother that students would continue analyzing literature and language and practice organizing ideas for essays.

Students were also able to share in the FDJs what they enjoyed most about the class and advocate for changes they would like to see in the course. Casey, a quiet baseball player, wrote, “My favorite part of this class is the group activities . . . listening to others’ viewpoints helps me to greater understand certain ideas about a subject.” His mother, an elementary school teacher, responded, “Group discussions and activities are definitely more effective in the classroom . . . this is also a great way to prepare these kids for what lies ahead in college.” Kelly, a student who was passionate about environmental and women’s rights issues, asked if students could bring in an essay for the class to read and discuss. She wrote, “We could use past issues, such as women’s rights, and compare that to what society (writers) view now . . . that would be quite a discussion.” A quiet girl who would not have made this request to Amber in person, Kelly was able to express her request through the FDJ, a democratic tool that allowed all voices to be heard. Amber wondered, when was the last time parents felt like they had a voice in the construction of curriculum? Through the FDJs, Amber was able to construct the next semester’s curriculum based on communication among students, parents, and teachers.

One curricular change Amber made was from what she saw missing in FDJ conversations. As she read student and parent entries viscerally attacking stereotyping because of race or sex, Amber noted that students seemed comfortable with stereotypes of people affected by poverty. This was revealed in their responses regarding social class to William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930/1985). Because of her students’ lack of experience with financial need, Amber decided to add another novel to the curriculum, *Angela’s Ashes* by Frank McCourt (1996), hoping that her students could read about someone’s personal experiences living in poverty. In addition, she added *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich (2002) to her summer reading list, preparing students for the issues of social class that would be addressed in her class throughout the year.

With more to teach in less time, teachers feel constant pressure. Some feel that to cover all the standards before testing they become like a farmer feeding chickens, tossing the feed out in hopes the chickens will get what they need. Freire (1970) referred to this attempt to “deposit” knowledge as “banking education.” He advocated a “problem posing” approach, an inquiry stance in which learners actively engage in posing and investigating questions about topics, questions that spring from classroom topics—but that may not be directly related to the original topic. Family Dialogue

**FDJ QUESTIONS FROM STUDENTS LEADING TO INQUIRY-BASED CURRICULUM**

- Who has been a role model in your life? (Elyse's classroom)
- What things are accepted in your culture that might not be accepted in another? Explain what it was like to come to this realization. (Angela's classroom)
- How would you choose to save an ice cube? (Stephanie's classroom)
- Do you remember when the Twin Towers fell down? Was I born yet? (Stephanie's classroom)
- When do you see people who look different from you in the world? (Jen's classroom)

Journals allow students, parents, and teachers to engage actively as they question and reason together. Inquiry has the power to transform a list of learning objectives into powerful topics of discussion and negotiation. As we participated in a more inquiry-based approach in our classrooms, we found that because students are learning and understanding at a deeper level as they engage with the journals and their family members, there *is* actually enough time to fit it all in. More importantly, our students retained the knowledge much better because of the active role they played in questioning, inquiring, and learning.

**Building on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity**

Family Dialogue Journals brought curricular content to life in our classrooms as we integrated family connections. Often, this integration began with a topic a student offered as a possible focus for FDJs. Students deepened their understanding of language arts in all our classrooms, as well as of math, social studies, and science standards in elementary classrooms, by linking learning to family responses and perspectives. This created a dialogic curriculum based on the cultural diversity in our classroom.

Jen and her young students identified one particularly strong connection between curricular content and families' backgrounds, which led to an investigation of families' geographic history.

"So," Jen began, after she and her students settled in to their carpet squares, "What do you think you want to write to our families this week?"

Students' hands shot up in the air, and they began discussing options. Some children were interested in asking families about maps. Others wanted to inquire about where their relatives lived. Still others had an interest in talking to families about their location in the world, which the children had begun studying by creating a diorama displaying the way a neighborhood fits into a city, a city fits into a state, and a state fits into a country. Each of these options was directly connected to the 1st-grade standards, and

the children's ideas for journal dialogue made clear they were interested in learning this information as it related to their families' backgrounds.

Jen saw an opportunity to merge these topics. "What do you think about asking your families about the place on a map where your families' stories took place?" she asked. The term "family stories" conjured up communal images for the children; during the previous year, they and their families had coauthored a book of personal narratives that focused on family events that were important to them. Jen also asked if the children would like to place pins on a map of North America as their families wrote back, offering a visual to aid in the students' understanding of maps.

The children voted to accept this idea as their next family dialogue journal entry. Then, they spread out around the room, some with clipboards on pillows and others scooted up to rectangular tables, and wrote about the place where their favorite family stories happened.

Some children, including Hector, wrote about Mexico. "My mom and dad live in Mexico, he wrote, but I don't live in Mexico." This journal entry was an opportunity for him to acknowledge the differences between his upbringing and that of his parents, while at the same time connecting this place to what he was learning about maps. "You get lots [lost], you ned [need] a map," he reminded his family. Mack wrote about his vacation to Florida, telling his family, "Flrdu was r family srey. Fudu was far away sed Mack. [Florida was our family story. Florida was far away said Mack.]"

The students finished each letter with, "*¿De dónde proceden nuestros familias?*/Where do our family stories come from on a map?" Then they placed their journals in book bags and carried them home.

When the journals trickled in on Monday morning, Jen and her students read them aloud during Morning Meeting. Jen's coteacher translated Spanish entries to English, and four children read aloud their original entry, along with each family's response. They learned that Mack's family had lived in the town in which their school sat for generations, and Mack proudly placed a pin with his name attached to it on the class's map of North America. They compared this to the second pin he placed on Florida, a place he and his family often vacationed. The class talked about how Mack knew it was far away, but looked much closer on the map. When Hector placed a pin on Michoacán, Mexico, Jen and her students discussed its distance from the other pins, as well as his mother's response regarding the differences in language, dress, and meals between Mexico and the United States. Other children who placed a family pin on Mexico agreed with this and shared what they knew about the brightly colored clothing, meals of beans and tortillas, and holidays like Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), which their families had described to them.

The map of North America remained on the wall at the front of their classroom for the rest of the year, with students referring to it in their writing and sharing its meaning with visitors. Some students began studying a globe



every morning, comparing what they saw there to what they had posted on the wall, oftentimes identifying the place representing their families' history. In these ways, Jen's class used the information in the FDJs and the classroom dialogue that had been made possible by the journals to make abstract concepts from the 1st-grade standards more concrete. The cultural diversity in her classroom made this deep understanding of geography tangible.

Linguistic diversity was also a resource in each of our classrooms, from Jennifer's multiple nationalities and languages to classrooms with multiple English dialects to several classrooms where Spanish was the predominant home language, such as Jen's.

Jen and her students began the Family Dialogue Journals the first Friday of the school year. After coconstructing their letter about "1st-grade hopes and dreams," Jen handed out new black-and-white composition notebooks. Students spread out around the room. The possibilities inherent in the blank pages of new journals seemed to refuel the children, tired out by their first full week back at school, and soon they were writing at desks, on pillows, or under tables with friends.

Jen and her student teacher rotated around the room, conferencing with and refocusing students as needed on the question to the children's families: "What are your hopes and dreams for me this year?" She stopped to write "*¿Cuales son sus sueños y esperanzas para mí?*" in Naldo's journal, as his family primarily spoke Spanish. Naldo's writing already consisted of multiple sentences. Jen's eyes widened when she realized he was writing his entry entirely in Spanish! He was a fearless speller, stretching out the sounds he heard and proudly displaying "keyro" as his sound-spelled version of "quiero," as he wrote that his hope for the year was to learn to drive a car.

Naldo shared his biliterate venture: "My mom wants me to learn Spanish and English this year. She will teach me to read in Spanish and I will teach her English, because she doesn't know much English yet and she wants me to help her learn." Jen was both surprised and impressed by his linguistic risk-taking. However, it seemed to Naldo to be a natural extension of his growing mastery of sounds. Why *wouldn't* he be writing in Spanish, since his family spoke Spanish at home, and he was going to place this journal in his book bag to share with them? He knew his audience!

Jen wondered what inspired Naldo to write this entry in Spanish. Was it the fact that they always translated their journal's question to Spanish, and this was a natural extension? Was it because their FDJs had inspired Jen and her students to discuss how they could learn from and with their families? Or was it, as Naldo explained, fueled by the deal his mother struck with him, promising she would assist him in learning to read Spanish if he did the same for her with English?

More than likely, it was a combination of these factors. Jen made a commitment to highlight Naldo's entry during Morning Meeting share time and to encourage other students to write to families in *their* home language,

as well. Naldo's connection between his journal's language and his audience helped Jen to realize writing in home languages was a powerful way to share families' funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

In Amber's AP English class, a class-generated prompt about language registers allowed students to discuss language diversity when sharing their journal responses. This prompt also created a venue for students to express how they felt about their own linguistic register: Southern vernacular. While most students were fluent in the power language of Standard English as well as street slang, they also participated in a linguistically diverse community because of the region in which they lived. Josh wrote, "I say ain't, y'all, and yonder a lot. I have just heard those words and other Southern phrases so much of my life; they have just been ingrained into my vocabulary." His mother included some Southern idioms and maxims as well.

Kelly wrote, "I use y'all, which I'm not sure is even a word." Another student said that "these terms have changed with time as more and more people become lazy and choose not to use the complete word." Clearly, students saw Southern vernacular as "bad" English, not realizing that there are rules that govern such speech. This discussion, which occurred due to the FDJ prompt, led to a mini-lesson on how "y'all" is a contraction of "you all" and how to spell it correctly. Amber also told students the rule of dropping the *g* on words and replacing *w* with *er* was also a consistent marker within the dialect. By discussing how Southern vernacular had "rules" just like Standard English, it was Amber's hope that it validated their use of such language. Furthermore, it made them more receptive to understanding that other dialects such as African American Vernacular were rule-based dialects that marked individuals as a part of a community. Building curriculum that is grounded in the cultural and linguistic diversity of students and families is radical and often empowering, but it is not sufficient. We must also develop critical ways of examining the world and our places in it (Freire, 2005).

## DEVELOPING CRITICAL LENSES

As students read, view, or write texts, critical educators equip them to question and evaluate, pushing toward the deepest levels of comprehension, including critiques of privilege. Students discuss power structures related to issues that directly affect them, their families, and their communities: race, social class, gender, language, religion, family structures, ability, and many other cultural influences. One of our goals in using FDJs was to help students develop a critical lens through their written questions, their familial dialogue at home, and through their discussions in the classroom. Sometimes this was challenging, as we wanted the topics to come from what the students identified to write about. How does one write a question about

counting back change in math that is thought provoking and geared toward social justice? During certain weeks, a critical question was just not possible, and other weeks, students blew us away with the scope of their thought processes. At other times, the nature of a student's or parent's entry presented teachers with an opportunity to engage the class in critical discussion. However, as Amber will share, not all critical questions necessarily led to a desired critical response.

### Developing the Critical Question

Sometimes students developed critical questions. Allen, a new student, moved into Stephanie's classroom mid-year; he was the only White child in the class. One day, when Stephanie asked him to partner with another student, Allen responded, "Me and my daddy don't really like Black people." Stephanie decided that exploring perspectives on race through children's literature might help Allen. She read aloud *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson (2001). They talked about the struggles that the main characters, one Black, one White, faced during segregation, ways the girls and their mothers helped to "knock down the fence" of segregation, and how the class could do the same. By Friday the students were still fixated on the fence metaphor; in the journals students told their parents about how the girls helped to end segregation by being friends even though they were different races. The students then posed the question, "How have you been affected by segregation? What have you done to knock down the fence?"

Many students shared experiences from their grandparents' childhood about segregated schools or how a relative had a friend of a different race growing up. One boy shared, "I wanted to play baseball but other White boys were already playing. They offered for me to play too. We knocked down a fence that day." Allen didn't share anything, but he checked out *The Other Side* from the library. Stephanie asked, "What book did you check out Allen?" He held the book up and responded, "I'm going to take it home to read with my dad." He began knocking down a fence that day.

Not all critical questions come so easily. Jennifer's school was hosting a bake sale to benefit their Relay for Life team. Her class created a rap, which they performed on the morning announcements. This was the highlight of their week and the students had no problem constructing the body of the letter, but the question stumped them. Students suggested questions like, "When you were little did you go on the announcements?" and "Tell me about a time you wrote a rap." Jennifer tried to help students generate critical dialogue.

She said, "Think about what we were promoting."

Students answered, "A bake sale!" "Brownies!" "Food!"

She tried again, "But think about who was doing the bake sale. It was Relay for Life, right? What is Relay for Life?"

They answered, “People who help other people!”

“Exactly! Maybe we could steer our question towards people helping people!” They decided to ask, “Tell me about a time you helped someone.”

Jennifer and her students found out that one student’s brother had raised money to help the homeless, and another mom donated money to an organization. Elizabeth’s dad said, “We helped people every year when during Thanksgiving I cook dinner for a shelter in downtown Atlanta, and also we donate clothes and toys to the local charity store.” Looking back, Jennifer regretted not extending the questioning to promote critical thinking that related to their own lives and perceptions about the world around them.

Later that year, after studying Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement, students wanted to write about this pivotal time. They decided to ask their families, “What would you boycott for?” Some of their families would boycott for things like human rights and being “kicked out of my job unfairly,” while others said they might not boycott, were unsure, or were “really not in favor of boycott. I won’t do it, I will find a different way to solve my problem.”

### Developing Critical Thinking

Angela noticed that it took her students several rounds of responding in the FDJs, talking and writing with families, and sharing family responses in class to look at texts with a critical lens and raise questions that might elicit a critical response. One of the first students to make this shift was Alexis when she focused on a question considering society’s perceptions of beauty.

*Alexis:* I think society’s ideal look is what we see in the magazines and movies. Skinny white girls who looks like they don’t eat anything. I think the media or entertainment has brainwashed us. And I think that’s really why a lot of people go bulimic and anorexic, because they feel like they have to look like the girls in the magazines and truth be told those girls don’t even look like that. Society’s look just isn’t ideal.

*Alexis’s mother:* I agree with you about what society thinks we should look like. We all are different shapes, color, and cultures. We should want people to love their differences. Everyone don’t look the same. Society doesn’t decide how we should feel about ourselves. We should decide that.

*Angela:* I agree. We get messages that there is only a limited way to be, but if we look around we see many who don’t match that “look.”

Beauty comes from within. That was one thing that my mother always said to me, but it is difficult to find that value in magazines and movies.

In this entry, Alexis questioned society's standard of beauty and compared it to the actual composition of society, most of which does not subscribe to this ideal. As Alexis grappled with the effects of such a standard on women (bulimia and anorexia), her mother also questioned society's power over how we perceive ourselves, and Angela validated both writers' comments.

Another student, Viridiana, also showed a willingness to critically question her own beliefs when she wrote on a question about abandoning one's culture:

*Viridiana:* Am I afraid of my culture? Am I ashamed of what I am? I was born here in Georgia. Sometimes I am ashamed of Mexicans because sometimes there are some Mexicans that were born in Mexico who dress like straight up Mexicans. Maybe why I am sorta ashamed of being Mexican is because I wasn't born in Mexico and I didn't grow up with their culture. I'm not going to lie, I love being Hispanic. I love the food and I love dancing to the music. Salsa, Buchata, Merengue, and Cumbia. I love the culture but a lot of people say they're immigrants. But not all of us are. It is just the judgmental people.

*Viridiana's cousin:* Well, I live here in California and it is like Mexico number 2. Hahaha. Especially if you go to Tijuana because the border is right there. I guess I'm used to it because I grew up here in Cali. Where most of the Mexican population is at. Having culture is good. Not everyone is going to be the same and in life there are always going to be people who judge no matter what race or culture they are. And you shouldn't be ashamed of our roots are from. It's life.

Intrigued by Viridiana's critical questions in this entry, Angela asked the class to consider them. Angela engaged the students in a discussion around masks and why people might mask who they are, connecting to a major theme in *Bronx Masquerade* and also to pieces in their student-published newspaper and to Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask" (1896). We saw one such dialogue in Chapter 1.

### **Engaging in Critical Classroom Discussions**

Jen and her students found that the power of Family Dialogue Journals to spur critical conversations and to connect them to one another emerged at unexpected times. One morning, Mack read aloud an excerpt from his

journal. He and his classmates had been learning about people with different skin colors and asked their families, “When do you see people that look different than you in the world?” Mack’s mother, Natalie, responded, calling for all people to work together to see beyond skin color, saying, “We all have different skin tones and can be part of the same nationality.” As Mack read her words in his clear, high voice, his long, brown fingers grasping the sides of his journal, it was as if Natalie were there in the room with them. Mack finished reading and looked up at his classmates.

“Does anyone have any questions or connections?” he inquired.

Hector’s hand shot into the air.

“Hector?” Mack invited.

Hector’s deep chocolate-colored eyes immediately filled with tears. The mood in the room immediately became tense, as Jen, her three student teachers, and the children all realized something was wrong, *really* wrong, with Hector.

Jen frantically tried to link bits and pieces of Hector’s family and home life to Mack’s journal, but was unable to identify a connection between Natalie’s reference to different skin tones and Hector’s family.

“Someone called my house yesterday,” Hector began. “He said that my family shouldn’t be here because we don’t speak good English, and that we should move back to Mexico. We’re moving in February.”

Jen’s thoughts whirled with phrases like, “It’s going to be okay,” and “I know that must be so hard,” tumbling through her brain like shoes in an empty dryer. They hit harshly against the silence in her usually chatty 1st-grade classroom. Everyone was staring at her as though they believed she would be able to say something, anything, to dissolve this tension.

Somehow, Jen spoke, determined that Hector not experience any further discomfort among his unusually quiet friends.

“Hector, your home is *here*. You have a home in Mexico, but you have a home *here*.” Jen connected Hector’s line of thinking to Mack’s journal entry and added, “You know those people who we’ve talked about who thought people with different skin colors shouldn’t be together?”

Michael nodded vigorously, simultaneously raising his hand and stating, “Yeah, it’s just like that. Sometimes people don’t like different languages, just like they didn’t like different skin colors.”

Michael had raised this point earlier in the year. He and his friends realized that although the students, families, and teachers that were part of their classroom community discussed valuing and respecting linguistic diversity, this was not always the case. However, they had not needed to connect these concepts in such a personal way until this moment.

Christopher said, “Hector is my best friend. I don’t want him to move! I came over here because he is sad and I want to hug him. I don’t want him to move!”

Christopher swiftly rose and gave Hector a long, tight hug. Jen was thankful for the simple brilliance in this action and reiterated Christopher's point. "We *all* love you very much, Hector. No matter what, you have a family in this classroom." Hector nodded bleakly, tears still on his face and looking a bit shell-shocked, as if he were reliving this event in its retelling.

Jen did the only thing she could think to do. She called for a hugging party.

Each of the students and teachers put their arms around the other, squeezing tightly and laughing, trying to convince themselves in the sheer physicality of the hugs that they were okay. In this moment, discussion around Family Dialogue Journals became a space for affirming relationships and demonstrating solidarity. It also became an opportunity to confront the reality that there were people in the world who treated others poorly because of linguistic supremacy.

This pivotal classroom event that emanated from FDJ sharing led the class to write more journal entries about the priority schools placed on speaking and writing in English. They created a project in response to the lack of books written in Spanish by coauthoring texts in multiple languages. The children engaged in impromptu discussions about how they could share their belief that all languages were equal to others, posing possibilities like sharing their books with libraries or writing newspaper articles.

Issues of prejudice entered the journals at all levels. In her high school classroom, Amber revised her curriculum to emphasize prejudice after students' responses to the prompt regarding satire in *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde (1895/2003). In the play, Wilde satirized societal traditions, assumptions, and norms. Examples include rich people's views and assumptions about the "lower" classes, the intolerance for differences, the ridiculous formality used among friends, and the trivial things that were valued by the upper classes. Amber asked students to choose something in today's world that deserved satirizing. Student and parent responses included obsession with technology; sports; material objects being favored over happiness; expectations of marrying young; government spending; political campaigns; conformity; desire for money; and competition over who is better, wealthier, smarter, and so on.

Although she had planned to move away from satire, after reading the FDJ entries Amber created a writing assignment asking students to use their journal entries to compose their own satire. Amber felt that by adjusting her instruction, she was able to bring students' and parents' valuable critiques of society into the classroom so that students could discuss them; these insights were too valuable to remain on the pages of a closed journal.

Responses in the FDJs were also indicators of which issues students and parents valued, allowing Amber to utilize these themes in the curriculum to enhance student interest. She noticed that students mentioned stereotypes 27 times in their entries. The number of prompts asking about

stereotypes? Zero. Clearly, this was something important to them. One student wrote about how he was followed in a store because he was a teenage African American male, profiled as a thief. His mother attributed this as normal behavior due to stereotyping. Beth wrote, “When I saw a commercial I was very offended. The insurance company is stereotyping the way teenage girls act while driving a car.” As a female teenage driver, Beth was infuriated that Allstate aired a commercial that perpetuated the stereotype that girls were bad drivers and were more concerned with texting than with their safety. Amber responded, “I do not like that commercial either. They fail to mention that teenage *boys* wreck more than girls.” Responding to the same prompt, Rajak, a skilled tennis player, expressed his disgust with a Metro PCS commercial that stereotyped Indians as nerds. He said, “They had strong Indian accents, said pointless things, dressed in generic telemarketing clothes, and were basically the definition of a stereotypical Indian.”

To maximize on this rich FDJ discussion, Amber created an assignment centered on stereotypes so that students had a chance to dialogue with each other, not just their parents and her, about this student-valued, critical issue. Since Amber’s class was reading Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1604/2002), she incorporated racial stereotypes as they discussed how Othello was forced to speak for his entire race. Despite his eloquent speech, the Venetians viewed him as a “Moor” and a “barbarian” due to the color of his skin. As a supplementary text, Amber chose Derek Kirk Kim’s (2004) “Hurdles,” a critical cartoon text about a Korean boy’s experience with prejudice. After doing a multimodal analysis, students wrote their own critical cartoon texts

#### COMMON CORE STANDARDS RELATED TO LITERACY, GRADE 10

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10.** By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems; at the high end of grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1.** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2.** Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3.** Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.



that revolved around social or racial stereotypes. This led students to a new appreciation of the pressure Othello was under, being positioned as a representative of all people of color.

If Amber had not listened to her students and analyzed their responses, she might have missed this collective concern about stereotyping. She and her students would have missed a rich and relevant opportunity to dialogue about their experiences with stereotypes and relate them to major themes in the literature.

A primary vehicle in all our classrooms for talking about issues of race, gender, social class, and other power-laden social constructs was literature. When readers in Angela's class found a single-parent household and a character in the book commenting on their life, students who also lived in single-parent homes voiced those connections. When one student shared her frustrations with being light skinned because it impacted her relationships with African American schoolmates, Angela and her students explored assumptions around skin tone in their communities. Angela added to their exploration voices from texts like Richard Rodriguez's essay "Complexion" (1983) and Christy Haubegger's essay "I'm Not Fat, I'm Latina" (1994). Examining argument texts such as these alongside the young adult novel allowed for deeper discussions and exploration of race and class. From these explorations, students then began to raise questions in the FDJs, such as the following:

1. How do we define beauty? What is considered beautiful in your culture and family? How does that compare to what society seems to say about what is beautiful?
2. Are certain jobs considered taboo in your family or culture? What are those jobs? Why are they considered off-limits?

That is not to say that these explorations and discussions happened without conflict. In all of our classrooms there have been times when student assumptions about race, gender, language, and class especially led to difficult discussions. Once in reading the excerpt from Sandra Cisneros' (1991) *The House on Mango Street*, "Those Who Don't," Angela's classroom filled with tension. A student felt that it was common sense to use caution when entering a "bad" neighborhood like the people described in the text. He gave the example of going to the football game on Friday, an away game in a community that was predominately African American and low income, and how he cautiously put his wallet in his front pocket. His assumption that the people of this community would automatically be a threat because of their race and class upset other students and Angela. The text had not challenged him to think about race and class in the critical ways Angela had hoped but had instead reaffirmed his assumptions. It was

an uncomfortable discussion; Angela could have used it as a reason not to delve into such topics in the future. Instead, Angela felt that she and her students needed more opportunities to explore and discuss difficult issues in order to gain understanding of one another using multiple strategies.

For example, the first day of examining “I’m Not Fat, I’m Latina,” Angela taught students, sitting in groups of three or four, to “dialogue with the text” as they read, writing on the text with their connections, questions, and highlighting quotes, words, and passages that spoke to them in some way. She asked them to stop at certain sections of the text and talk with their group about the written dialogue they had had. At each stop, students were to summarize the assigned section, share quotes and passages, raise questions, and share their connections. Once they felt they had a grasp of the material in that section, they collaboratively developed a discussion question for the section and followed the same process for the next section.

The following day Angela used the jigsaw protocol to continue the discussion of the text. First students met with their original group and gathered their thoughts from the previous day to “become experts” on their group’s interpretations by examining their notes and to collaboratively decide on what was most important to share. Then they moved to new groups where they shared what their original group developed. In this new grouping Angela taught the “Save the Last Word for Me” protocol: Each student presents an idea, question, or connection they’ve made to the text; then others add their ideas. They work their way around the group until all have added to the first expert’s idea, question, or connections. Finally, they arrive back to the original student expert and she can defend or go further with her original idea based on what has been shared. Then it is on to the next group member to present his idea. (See the National School Reform Faculty Protocols for these and other excellent discussion strategies at [www.nsrffharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z](http://www.nsrffharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z).)

As Angela made her way around the room, she heard students’ lively debate on the author’s intent at one table, while at another several students nodded as a student said her family and cultural expectations of women’s bodies was much like that of Haubegger’s. Latina students especially related to the challenges Christy Haubegger faced. In her Latina culture, women with full, curvaceous bodies are considered *bien cuidadas* (well cared for), but in mainstream media and the American medical profession, women like her are judged as fat. Students wondered if this prejudice solely applied to women, discussing intersections of gender and ethnicity. They made connections to film, music, and literature they had read both in school and outside of the class. It was one of those discussions that teachers dream of, but Angela reluctantly pulled them from their small groups into a whole-class discussion.

### COMMON CORE STANDARDS RELATED TO CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS OF LITERATURE

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1:** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2:** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3:** Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Students shared what they had discussed in their groups. Angela wrote their questions, connections, and ideas on the board as students shared. From there, students discussed what to write about in the Family Dialogue Journals that would help to show families what they had discussed and to get an idea of where they stood on the issues with which they grappled. Students wrote down the ideas on the board until there were eight prompts from which to choose, reflecting both critical and personal analyses of the social issues in Haubegger's piece. Angela described it as "one of those magical days when everyone is so engaged in what is taking place in the room that you lose sense of time." In the process, they addressed multiple standards.

### Responding to Resistance

While critical discussions built community and provided support for students in several classrooms who were experiencing prejudice in their lives, Amber encountered difficulties bringing critical inquiry into upper-middle-class homes. She struggled with student resistance, and with how to respond to hostile entries. This was especially challenging when the class read *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner and Amber introduced the issue of social class through an FDJ prompt. Amber's students expressed their belief that the majority of people have the same opportunities as they do because they were middle class, "middle" indicating "average," and therefore the majority. While students stated that stereotyping the poor as "lazy and ignorant" was unfair and inaccurate, when pressed, they were not able to envision how or why people might be living in poverty. During discussion, some students said that people

become poor because they made bad decisions in their life. Referring to the novel, Amber asked her students if this was true for each character. Students were, however, willing to reconsider their previous assumptions about why people are poor, recognizing that those born into poverty, like Faulkner's Bundrens, have less opportunities available than those of a higher economic status.

Amber's FDJ prompt invited students and families to question society's view of people affected by poverty. While Amber's students were willing to discuss the disparity between social classes and question the common depiction of the poor as being lazy and ignorant in their journals, many parents defended their lifestyle, as shown by the following entries:

- I think that poor people these days look upon the richer class as "evil" and lacking of compassion for people that have less. Some people feel that they are owed what the richer class has, but they forget or don't realize that most of these people have worked long and hard to get where they are today.
- There is, unfortunately, a part of our society who relies on others to sustain their lives. These include populations who depend on the country's social programs . . . these populations are generally a cycle that continues.
- I believe there are two kinds of poor people. Those who simply believe that money is not important, and carry on their lives in a very full way. The other kind of poor person is someone who carries out behavior that made them poor.

Amber realized that these parents had a particularly strong reaction to these prompts. She was not immune from having strong feelings herself about their entries, and her first instinct was to shoot off a message that highlighted their selfishness, indicating that they only saw the poor as leeches, bleeding them of their taxes and not as people who have dreams that are unobtainable due to their poverty. So, how does a teacher respond when students and parents write what they truly believe but it flies in the face of everything the teacher believes?

While Amber's emotional reaction to these parents was strong, the journal was created as a safe space for students and parents to share their feelings and insights about such social problems. Just because Amber did not agree with their point of view, she could not violate the safety of the journal by responding with a harsh negative judgment of their beliefs. It would not be fair to invite parents and students into this dialogue only to attack them. Therefore, Amber did not respond to the entries right away, and she composed a couple of drafts before she felt that her response did not insult the parents but still communicated her perspective.

Amber realized that the parents did not know where she was coming from. She had such a strong response because as a child, she was once dependent on the programs that the parents so vehemently criticized. However, when she thought about her biological mother, who often abused the system by trading her food stamps for drugs, she realized that the parents weren't all wrong. At the same time, if the stamps had not been available, Amber's health would have suffered. While they had a point that some individuals do abuse the system, the majority do not. Amber realized that it was the fact that they insinuated that the majority of the poor fell into this group that upset her, and realizing this, she was able to create an even-toned response that highlighted the effect of poverty on children:

I feel that many high achievers are successful because they came from a socioeconomic status (parents) that could financially give them the resources to be successful. I feel for the parents who are unable to provide such opportunities . . . I think this plays a role in how many children born into poverty, remain in poverty.

The lesson Amber hopes to convey? Do *not* write your first gut reaction to what one might deem as a hostile entry. By taking a couple of days, Amber was able to see things from the parents' perspective and she was able to write a response that was sensitive to their anger of having their hard-earned money taken away from their children to support someone else's, while gently suggesting the necessity of such measures for the well-being of humankind.

#### FDJ QUESTIONS THAT DEVELOPED CRITICAL LENSES

- How do you feel about the ways in which the media portrays beauty? How, if any, has this affected your body image? (Angela's classroom)
- In this week's entry, please craft a question (and response) that relates social class issues in *As I Lay Dying* to issues of class in today's world. (Amber's classroom)
- How can I use the power of my words, like Martin Luther King, Jr.? (Elyse's classroom)
- Do you think people rely on religion just so they don't have to question the unknown? (Amber's classroom)
- How can we relate social class issues in Harry Potter to those we see today? (Amber's classroom)
- What would you boycott for? (Jennifer's classroom)
- How much influence do ads have in shaping our identities? (Angela's classroom)

### BRINGING FAMILIES INTO THE CLASSROOM (LITERALLY)

While we emphasize throughout this book the fact that becoming partners with families through FDJs does not require parents or caregivers to come into the classroom, sometimes they do!

As Jen noted earlier in this chapter, Family Dialogue Journals became a way for children and teachers to learn about the diverse, interesting places where everyone's families had previously lived. Geography fascinated the students, even early in their kindergarten year. They often called out, "Let's Google Earth it!" if they were unfamiliar with the location referenced in a book or lesson. It came as no surprise to Jen, then, when the children posed the question, "Where are you from?" in their FDJ. What Jen *did* find surprising, though, was the information that families shared in response to this inquiry.

During one Morning Meeting, students were sharing their family responses to the question, "*¿De dónde eres?*/Where are you from?"

"It looks like many of your families are from Michoacán, Mexico," Jen said.

Hector's hand shot into the air. "That's where my family is from, too! My family is from Michoacán!"

The children with Michoacán family connections smiled broadly at one another, as Jen pulled up Google Earth and showed the whole class where the state of Michoacán was in relation to where they all currently lived. Everyone ooohhed and aaahhed as they "flew" from the United States to Mexico. Children bounced up and down on the carpet, pointing and squinting as the Smart Board settled on Michoacán. Perhaps they were hoping to see the family farms their parents had described to them for years.

Jen realized what an amazing resource her students' families were in their study of geography. Writing about where they were from in the FDJs brought a study of places that might have otherwise been drab or boring to life. Their interest in the topic was heightened by their connection to one another, and Jen wanted to build upon this. So she invited a family member who wanted to share into their classroom to tell the students more about the place from which their families came. Elena, Hector's mother, agreed to come talk to the class, after Jen assured her that Mr. Oswaldo would translate from Spanish to English, that she could bring her other children, and that Jen's husband would come pick her up.

All barriers removed, Elena heartily agreed. On the morning of her visit, Hector's eyes shone brightly in anticipation of his mother walking through the door, and when she did, he ran to greet her, grabbing her hand and leading her to the chair set up at the front of the classroom, just for her. Hector proudly sat next to her.

After the children's excited chatter died down and they sat looking expectantly at her, Elena began to share. She talked about the freedom she

felt in her home country, thus weaving into the discussion a previous family dialogue journal topic on freedom; Elena recalled running through the fields around her home, staying out all day, and knowing every one of her neighbors.

When Mack asked her to describe what her home looked like, Elena caught Jen's eye. She pointed to the Smart Board marker, asking if she could *draw* what she remembered. "Of course!" Jen agreed. Elena drew the chickens, pigs, and horses that meandered their way in and out of the home, its outside and inside spaces blending. This fascinated the children, most of whom had little experience with farm animals and could only imagine dogs or cats living in someone's home.

When the conversation concluded, the students cheered, and Elena and Hector beamed. It was then that Elena pulled out three cakes from the bakery where her husband worked, telling Jen they were a gift for her and the students. Elena had taken time out of her day to visit, had traveled in a car with a man she barely knew to get to the school, and yet *she* was bringing gifts of appreciation. *What a lesson she has taught me in care and love for others*, Jen wrote in her teaching journal later that day. *I'm sure I will learn much more from her as the year continues.*

Jen realized how powerful it was for the children to discover their families' Michoacán connection and how important it was that she build on this interest by extending invitations for face-to-face interactions about this topic. The success of this first visit led to others, including Jen's own father and stepmother who told the class about their hometown in Michigan. The children asked Jen to place photographs and descriptions of each of these visits on their classroom learning wall, where they posted their favorite learning events from the year (Vasquez, 2004). Further, Elena's generosity taught Jen a lesson on humility and selflessness, and she worked to weave this thread of grace into her own life, both in and out of the classroom.

In this chapter we have shared glimpses into our classrooms and into the coconstruction of curriculum that is connectional and critical. Through the Family Dialogue Journal process, we are better able to (1) take into account student interests and ideas to bring standards alive, (2) incorporate family funds of knowledge to make curriculum relevant, (3) build on the vast resources of cultural and linguistic diversity within and beyond our classrooms, and (4) encourage critical thinking about social issues. In the next chapter, we explore an equally powerful aspect of Family Dialogue Journals: the relationships formed through this forum for dialogue.