14

Critical Literacy and School Reform: So Much to Do in So Little Time

Jody Cohen
Jolley Bruce Christman
Eva Gold
Research for Action

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>
> —*(Campher et al. (1996, p. 18)*

An African American young woman in an urban school system, Monika participated as a coresearcher in her middle school's reform effort, an arena where students' voices have been strangely absent. In doing this work, they practiced critical literacy skills—using reading, writing, speaking, and listening in an effort to read the world of their own schooling and "rewrite it ... transforming it by means of conscious practical work" (Freire, 1985, p. 10). Conducting research with adolescents has led a team of us—researchers working with parents, teachers, and principal at a middle school—to consider the challenges and implications of doing inquiry with students to improve school. In this chapter, we examine how adolescents can inform school reform and how reform in turn can provide a fertile site for adolescent literacy learning.

We are colleagues at Research for Action (RFA), a small nonprofit educational research and evaluation group based in Philadelphia. Collectively, we bring a background that includes teaching and parenting schoolchildren, involvement with community-based organizing and services, and our current work as qualitative researchers and evaluators in a range of public education settings. We braid these strands of experience as we seek ways of using the qualitative research methods of looking, listening, and gathering site documents as tools of reflection and action with people engaged in trying to assess and improve their schools. This participatory research effort involves people in schools and programs, traditionally the subjects of research, in formulating research questions, collecting and analyzing data, using findings to inform their work, and disseminating findings to broader audiences. We like to work with cross-role groups—bringing together people from a range of positions and perspectives, including students, teachers, administrators, and parents—to negotiate shared

concerns and use data as a means of describing and addressing these concerns (Christman & MacPherson, 1996; Cohen, 1994; Gold, 1996).

In 1993, two of us (Cohen and Christman) entered into an action research project in which qualitative researchers from RFA and the Center for Urban Ethnography (CUE) at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education partnered with schools involved in restructuring.[1] This action research project, called Taking Stock/Making Change (TSMC), is a public school–university partnership in which five schools took stock of their efforts at moving decision making from the central office to local levels. In each school, cross-role teams identified their concerns and collected and reflected on data to inform their reform efforts. TSMC has been funded by the Knight Foundation over several years in recognition of the time and intensive effort required to make fundamental change in schools.

Participants at one of the TSMC schools, Academy for the Middle Years (AMY) in northwest Philadelphia, decided early on to solicit students' perspectives as a way of learning more about what was going on at the school. It was only later, as the team of adults worked with a second cohort of student-researchers, that this research was seen as teaching and learning. This chapter draws extensively from the narrative data and the written report of the AMY action research project (Campher et al., 1996) to tell the stories of two student cohorts who became school reform researchers as well as critical literacy learners.[2]

CONCEPTUAL FRAMES

In this section, we track the literatures of school reform and critical literacy, respectively, looking for points at which these usually separate strands of theory and practice might inform and enrich each other. Given the national reform picture that is including professional development with "teachers in research [and] collaborative inquiry" (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 6), it seems a propitious moment to connect these conversations. As a point of intersection, we suggest that adolescents' critical literacy learning be applied not only to large-scale societal issues but also to the immediate, daily issues of schooling and school reform. The third section of this chapter examines several years of the AMY participatory research effort, with a focus on what we call episodes of critical literacy. We consider how including adolescents as coresearchers of their schools can promote both school reform and literacy learning, and we look at questions and dangers called up by this work.

School Reform

Where are students in school reform? Urgent calls for educational improvement stress that American youth must achieve at higher levels to prepare for democratic citizenship and productive employment. Typically, however, reform conversations shift quickly from students to adults, policies, and programs (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Nieto, 1994; Rivera & Poplin, 1995). In this section, we search for students in reform. How are they positioned and how are their roles defined? What does this reveal about assumptions underlying reform? How might school reform benefit from students' critical investigations of their schooling?

[1] RFA functioned as a subcontractor to CUE on this project.

[2] Members of the AMY team have read and responded to this chapter in process. We thank these adults as well as their students for their wonderful work—with us and in their schools.

In recent decades, Americans have looked to national, state, and district policies as levers for school improvement. In the early 1980s, policy sought to address what was decried as the rising tide of mediocrity through rigorous, standardized curricula often coupled with prescribed teacher-directed instructional models. In Philadelphia, for example, the school district embarked on a reform that highlighted a standardized curriculum with a framework for each subject area and a pacing schedule prescribing how teachers were to march their students through subject matter. City wide testing aligned test items with discrete curriculum objectives to help schools monitor student progress toward specified goals. This reform agenda positioned teachers to implement change by delivering knowledge to students. Students were to receive knowledge and spit it back on system-wide tests. Teachers were to be recipients of change, and students were to be recipients of knowledge.

As flaws in prescriptive approaches to school improvement became apparent, reformers began investigating the organizational patterns, cultures, and possibilities of schools. School renewal was viewed as possible only through systematic and critical inquiry into schooling (Christman, Cohen, & MacPherson, 1997; Erickson & Christman, 1996; Glickman, 1993). School-based management and shared decision making have their roots in 1970s studies that demonstrated the importance of local context and investment in successful change efforts (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978). Change that affected beliefs, values, assumptions, and daily interactions was considered to require street-level bureaucrats who had the knowledge to manage complex problems (Lipsky, 1980). Organizational learning among actors within a school became seen as a prerequisite to overcoming overload and fragmentation, major barriers to school change (Fullan, 1996).

Organizational learning emphasized critical masses of diverse groups of people inside schools who understood the change process and valued action that includes research, reflection, and revision. Cross-role groups were considered to have the most potential for making change because "in such a group different worlds collide, more learning occurs and change is realistically managed" (Fullan & Miles, 1992, p. 751).

In the 1990s, constructivist theories of teaching and learning recast students as active builders of knowledge. Schools were to develop students' habits of mind, as in the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Standards which prioritize mathematical thinking over rote memorization. But as constructivism coexists with old policies and practices, teachers and students must manage the resulting disjunctures:

> When teachers are unable to help students make sense of the school environment, the students (and often their teachers as well) become alienated. Young people are very good at identifying things that do not "make sense" and rejecting them.... Solving the problems of contradictory policies is a prerequisite for solving the problems of student engagement and learning in schools. (Darling-Hammond, 1993, p. 757)

Constructivism also has generated attention to teachers' ongoing education, demanding new kinds of professional development as a strand of school reform (Lieberman & Miller, 1992; Little, 1993). If schools are to change, teachers have to be involved as active agents of that change. Attending to what teachers and administrators need to know and be able to do to enact reform provides essential underpinnings to newly aligned policies and structures. Meier (1995)

tied adults' professional growth to student learning: "We will change American education only insofar as we make all schools educationally inspiring and intellectually challenging for teachers. The school itself must be ... organized to make it hard for teachers to remain unthoughtful" (p. 142). In such a setting, teachers assess change proposals for their fit with current contexts and priorities, and teachers and students become a community for learning (Darling-Hammond, 1993).

As teachers make the shift from prescriptive pedagogy to responsive teaching, they must attend to who their students are and how they learn. When teachers seek to adapt innovations to their students' experiences, needs, and abilities, youths themselves become invaluable informants to reform (Christman & MacPherson, 1996; Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Gold, 1996). In Philadelphia, where teacher networks have a strong history (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Useem, Buchanan, Meyers, & Maule-Schmidt, 1995), educators have sought deeper understanding of their students through collaboration and inquiry into practice. Networks provide sites for teachers individually and collectively to investigate their students as learners (Gold, 1996; Lytle et al., 1994). For example, in the Teachers Learning Cooperative, a group that has met for 15 years, teachers use Carini's (1986) documentary processes to see the whole child: what a student cares about; what talents, interests, and skills they bring to learning tasks; and what family and community experiences they bring to school (Kanevsky, 1992). In a participatory evaluation study conducted by RFA, elementary, middle, and high school teachers looked for more than 3 years at students' transitions through school (Gold, 1996). Teachers used in-depth knowledge gained by looking closely at their students to suggest and implement structures that would support children in their school transitions.

Of course, asking students about reform is not unproblematic. Herr, a practitioner who described work with a racially diverse group of adolescents in an independent school, explored the question, What is it like to be a student of color in this school? The inquiry led to "critical knowledge aimed at concrete applications within the school" (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994, p. 95) as well as difficult encounters between action researchers and other key players at the school. Herr recalled: "I felt caught between the reality of the boys' story telling and the sanctioned discourse of the school" (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 97). Another participant in this project, Soohoo, recalled the moment when her research with students became activism:

> Drawing strength from each other, the [student] co-researchers expressed a compelling need to actively reshape their learning conditions.... At this point, I remember reflecting about the fate of my research. What had happened? What were my responsibilities to the students, teachers, and principal of this school? (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 62)

Corbett and Wilson (1995) urged having students take an active role in shaping educational reform. They argued that student role redefinition is a major goal of reform and that such reframing must begin during rather than after and as a result of reform. Teachers and parents also point out that reform needs students. In a study of the creation of small learning communities in a large Philadelphia high school, competition among these smaller units became a problem. Teachers asked students to design strategies to address the issue. In a focus group of parents and teachers drafting performance standards for Philadelphia, a parent noted, "Students

need to be part of this. They're the ones who have to buy in to standards. They ought to help write them."[3]

Restructuring involves reculturing. As both teachers and students become active builders of knowledge, they can take on active roles in generating and guiding change in their settings. As teachers' roles, tasks, and workdays become less fragmented, teachers can engage in the individual and collective problem solving required for continuous improvement. Likewise, students must investigate, critique, and help to plan and shape reform. This represents a fundamental change in school culture, a change that would affect how students and adults interact and would instigate rich possibilities for school reform. Critical literacy learning can provide adolescents with an investigative tool to take on this work.

Critical Literacy With Adolescents

Critical literacy focuses on "the relationships among culture, language, literacy and power" (Willis, 1995, p. 40). Students use talk and texts to construct and question meanings based on the recognition of power differentials, contradictory perspectives, and the possibility of enacting change. Rooted in the work of adult educator and social activist Freire (1973, 1983, 1985), critical literacy seeks to empower learners to transform their own lives and their society. Adult literacy learners are invited to name and reflect on key words and ideas from their experiences to catalyze their (re)writing and (re)reading of the word and the world.

A number of educators of secondary students recognize in critical literacy a promising framework for engaging an adolescent population increasingly at risk of disengaging from school (Bigelow, 1990; Fecho, 1992; Frankenstein, 1987; McLeod, 1986; Willis, 1995). Already in a time of transition, adolescents are both vulnerable and receptive to participating in change with a potential to transform themselves and their surroundings. Thus, the developmental strengths and needs of adolescents suggest rigorous critical literacy learning as an avenue of transformation for students and their communities. Willis (1995) viewed the critical frame as essential to the literacy learning of adolescents not from the dominant school culture. Although we agree that critical literacy can provide low-income, urban, and culturally diverse adolescents with an important framework, here we suggest the efficacy of critical literacy learning for all adolescents because, in this society, adolescents are defined as other than the dominant (adult) culture.

The Freirean model of critical literacy envisions classrooms where teachers and students "develop reading, writing, thinking, speaking and listening habits [that] provoke conceptual inquiry into self and society and into the very discipline under study" (Shor, 1987, p. 24). Teachers and students are invited to "*problematize* all subjects of study, that is, to understand existing knowledge as a historical product deeply invested with the values of those who developed such knowledge" (Shor, 1987, p. 24). Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) called for teachers to act as transformative intellectuals who can help students reflect critically on their lives.

The classroom practices of John Hardcastle, a teacher of boys with a reputation for trouble, offer a vivid picture of critical literacy in the secondary school. Student writings and transcripts of classroom talk in this classroom show how pedagogy linked "critical commentary and discussion of social issues with literacy" (McLeod, 1986, p. 37). For example,

[3]This uncited statement—as well as others in this chapter—comes from the narrative data gathered during the AMY project.

discussions of race and class asymmetries in the global economy inspired provocative writings that, in turn, regenerated critical talk.

Teacher-researchers also describe curricula in which adolescents develop critical literacy skills by using their life experiences as a foundation to investigate and critique social arrangements. Fecho (1992) coinvestigated language with his African American high school students by asking, "What were my students' conceptions of language and how did they perceive language relating to power?" (p. 9). Although he set out with the notion of encouraging students' critique of language–power configurations, Fecho (chap. 4, this volume) explored with his students their more complex and contradictory experience of the relation between language and power.

School communities can be complex settings for teachers and students to practice critical literacy. When one class of predominantly African American, working-class students investigated their schooling, their frustration with their data "encouraged (them) to see themselves as victims—powerless little cogs in a machine daily reproducing the inequities of the larger society" (Bigelow, 1990, p. 3). To address this issue, the teacher turned to such strategies as role plays and simulations to draw students into a dialogue about the dynamics of power and resistance.

Perhaps because of its origins with adults whose primary locus tended to be the workplace, critical literacy for adolescents has tended to focus their inquiry and analysis outwards—on the larger community and society—rather than on the immediate and shared context of schooling itself. However, there is no ready conduit to making change in society or even in a community. In addition, because of their age, adolescents tend to hold little sway in the adult world. Further, the daily shared work environment for most adolescents is the institution of school rather than the labor force. Why, then, not do the work of adolescent critical literacy by focusing on school as the common home site, particularly when this work also would benefit school reform?

Schools are well positioned to give students practice in participatory democracy. Borrowing Katz's proposal of more than a decade ago, McLeod (1986) suggested that "the idea of using critical thinking to develop an educated citizenry might be used to shape school policy" (p. 41). Making school reform a site for the practice of adolescent critical literacy would both bring students' perspectives to bear on school reform, particularly urgent where teachers' and students' experiences are most divergent (Nieto, 1994), and give students an authentic setting for participatory democracy.

Although not often situated in the critical literacy camp, the collaborative literacy work of Heath, Branscombe, and Thomas (Branscombe & Thomas, 1992; Heath, 1984) provides an important example of adolescent critical literacy learning focused on youths' immediate contexts. In an era of teacher research that encouraged inquiry into multiple perspectives, Branscombe and Heath introduced Branscombe's ninth-grade Basic English class to an investigation of their family and community literacy practices. Branscombe described the project as compelling to her students because someone (i.e., the researcher, Heath) was really interested in learning from them, it mattered to them that they be understood, and they were learning by doing. Adolescent literacy learning serves here as a way of to bring adolescents' worlds into school and make them count, while also extending students' ability to read and write their worlds.

Branscombe and Heath continued to work with Charlene Thomas, a student

in Branscombe's class, after she dropped out of school. This collaboration pushed the boundaries of school and opened up new dimensions and implications of adolescent critical literacy learning. Thomas transformed from a youngster who never succeeded in a formal learning situation to a young adult using literacy skills in crucial ways in her life. As a young single mother of five children, Thomas used critical literacy skills to teach her children, to reflect on events in order to be more aware of them, and to effect and monitor needed changes in her life:

> According to Charlene, seeing herself as an ethnographer allows her to have several roles (mother, observer, worker, recorder, and writer), which make up an identity of success rather than a member of the underclass. By being an observer, she is able to confront bureaucratic agencies, fail to get what she wants, step back, and start over. She recalled doing field notes for Shirley ... Charlene noted that having to deal with the agencies is no harder than having to gather data. (Branscombe & Thomas, 1992, p. 17)

Thomas' initial coresearch with Heath and Branscombe and its outcomes 10 years later pointed out the potential power of critical literacy learning for adolescents as they stand on the brink of their adult lives (Branscombe & Thomas, 1992; Heath, 1984).

ACADEMY FOR THE MIDDLE YEARS PROJECT

This section introduces a participatory research effort at an urban middle school where a self-study team made students' perspectives central to their inquiry. We examine this effort as an episode of critical literacy, looking on the one hand at how listening to students' voices supported school change and on the other at how participating in reflection and action supported students as literacy learners. We also examine ways in which students' voices did not transform practice and ways in which the research fell short of its teaching potential; we examine problems in the project as grist for considering future endeavors.

AMY is a small, urban, public middle school with teaching teams, theme-based curriculum and assessment, narrative evaluations, and staff and parents involved in site-based management and shared decision making. Faculty members have been leaders in local teacher networks like the Philadelphia Writing Project and Science Resource Leaders. The school's stated mission is to create a learning-centered community actively engaged in the adventure of quality learning and preparation for success in a changing, diverse world.

Two-hundred and fifty AMY students in Grades 6 to 8 come from neighborhoods across the city and are predominantly African American and White. They are selected by lottery with the stipulation that the school maintain a racial mix. A student described his peers this way: "The kinds of kids at AMY—just go on the street, right, just walk down the street and you'll see every single person that would go to AMY." These young adolescents come from their neighborhood elementary schools into this new setting often knowing no one. Three years later, they exit this now familiar environment to return to neighborhood high schools or to attend magnet schools or other special programs.

School reform in the early 1980s marked an identity crisis for AMY, a school that was developing innovative curriculum and instruction focused on the whole child as active learner. There were many concerns about the stance of AMY toward the district policy increasing emphasis on curricular stand-

ardization and narrowly focused assessment. At this time, Sizer (1992) was forming the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national network of schools committed to enacting teaching and learning principles such as less is more and student as worker, teacher as coach, and parent as collaborator. AMY staff saw the Coalition as offering a network of like-minded people and joined in 1988. Staff, parents, and students of AMY have participated in Coalition activities at the national and state levels. The Coalition has provided a framework for AMY adults to develop a shared discourse about what they want for their students.

Like their students, AMY adults represent a range of races, ethnicities, and neighborhoods. For staff as well as parents, AMY offers an oasis in a large bureaucratic system, a place where they can have a say and an impact on their children's education. Even so, they are buffeted by ongoing change at the district level as they engage in the struggle to move into local self-governance. In the 1990s, a team from AMY that included teachers, parents, and the principal applied to take part in the TMSC action research project, not to begin change but to document and reflect on changes in motion. How were innovations like interdisciplinary team teaching and portfolio assessment working for students? The team framed two guiding questions: Are we doing what we say we are doing at AMY? How is AMY preparing our students for high school according to the outcomes stated in our learning plan? A parent pressed for starting with students: "The best way to find out [some answers] is to look at the kids, hear what they have to say." So the AMY team chose to solicit students' perceptions about what was happening at their school and how they were making the transition from middle to high school.

Although the AMY project began as research to be conducted outside the classroom and carefully separated from teachers' assessments of students, we came to question its separation from teaching and learning. We examine this research for its dual potential to inform school change and to promote critical literacy learning for adolescents. The next two sections describe reform and critical literacy experiences with the first- and second-year groups of AMY participants with whom we worked.

COHORT I: CONSONANCE

The AMY team began their inquiry by gathering a group of eighth graders selected to represent a range in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and levels of participation and achievement in school. Cohen and Christman, RFA researchers, and teachers Gene Campher and Lana Gold met with the students to say, "We want to work with you for the rest of this year, asking you about your experiences at AMY, and then we want you to come back next year and tell us how AMY prepared you for high school." CUE researchers and parents Bonnie Mason, Linnie Jones, Barbara Wagner, and Yvonne Epps conducted initial focus group interviews to ask students about their experiences. Later Campher (Campher et al., 1996) recalled his uneasiness and excitement at this first meeting with students:

> I recall us (teachers and CUE researchers) sitting in a room trying to explain the process to some 20–25 eighth graders and what it would demand of them and mean to us.... The students asked questions for nearly 30 minutes of such a mature nature that we, the adults, were so impressed that I felt we had gotten the answer to our question already. The questions were

thoughtful, high level, generally focused on the task and rarely personal. They cared about the process and its results. One asks, "What's the purpose of this?" Someone else asks, "Could we listen to the tapes later?" Another student, "What about the quiet people, are you going to make them speak?" Yet another, "Will we be benefiting from this?" They trusted the adults who were there enough to speak their mind freely. Hitting close to home, a student asks Lana and me (the two teachers in the room), "You won't be there? Why, don't you want to know what we're saying?" I knew then that the focus groups would be a rich source of information ... .

We often talk of school climate and school culture, but it's usually from the viewpoint of adults, the ones "in charge." Here we were daring to ask our consumers, current students, how they thought about what was happening with them and to them.... What a novel idea, asking students what the school setting looked and felt like to them! Considering that no one had ever asked them before in any organized fashion, this must have been a definitive moment for them as well. I'm sure they must have asked themselves and each other, Are they serious? Do I dare tell them what I really think? We talk about empowering students, we must be honest enough to hear what they have to say. (pp. 7–9)

Listening to Students' Voices

Although middle school students inhabit their schools daily and know them from the inside out, they are seldom asked to reflect aloud on how they experience school. Nevertheless, the first cohort of students responded with fluidity and acumen to focus group questions. They zeroed quickly in on issues of alternative assessment and exit standards, areas of hard work and rapid growth for AMY staff.

Researcher: If you were talking with a friend who was interested in coming to AMY, what would you tell them about the school?

Monika: I would tell them it's OK. It does have small classrooms; it's a good school because we close and we know people.... But like here they pass you in the sixth and seventh grade but eighth grade they start piling on the work. And so they pass you even if you don't deserve to be passed and when you get to eighth grade you expect to be passed and then they just like sock you.

Kenny: They change their minds too much, they let you by for two years and the next thing they're telling you—They say one thing, and then a minute later they're telling you another.

Although adults were working to make changes to improve AMY, from students' perspectives these changes could feel externally imposed and arbitrary, designed to trip them up. After reading Cohort I transcripts, Gold was struck with the enormity of listening to adolescents describe their experience in their language:

During our transcript analysis meeting, I remarked, "It almost creeped me out reading this.... They became a mini-society amongst themselves that I'm not

> aware of, a community of kids with a culture unto themselves that I'm alien to. None seemed to hesitate with questions. They are cognizant about what's happening. They hung together. The experience seemed unifying. There is not a lot of contradiction between them. They share a value system." This was an extremely powerful moment for me because I thought I knew these kids so well, only to discover that I knew only one level. I wasn't aware of these "sub-communities." As our TSMC team discussed this matter, we wondered if the "elephant" [in the living room that no one ever mentions] for us isn't our students. (Campher et al., 1996, p. 13)

After the initial focus groups, students remained adamant about asking, "What's happening with this [research project]?" Their agitation pushed the team to convene more student meetings. When we convened the group to look at the focus group transcripts, Mason saw the students redefine their role in the research:

> That [student analysis] session turned out to be what I experienced as the first critical moment for the entire team as students in Cohort I moved from being informants to researchers by their own initiative.
>
> Some of the students sat studiously reading the transcripts. Others were riffling pages back and forth trying to find things they had said and remembered friends having said. Every once in a while they would quietly consult with one another. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a very tense silence in the room. Several students appeared not to be very engaged or to be bordering on resentment.
>
> Monika seemed to be intently reading and on task with Jody's assignment to find things that stood out as important in the transcripts. She looked up and said to Jody, "Can I ask a question? I know this is me here.... I know I said this one thing here, I know it is me saying it, but I don't feel the same way now. Can I change this?" Jody replied, "That is an excellent question and shows that you have a good sense that you are an important part of the analysis process. Part of looking at data you produce yourself is being able to see how circumstances change and how that makes the data change. When researchers reflect, they are able to correct it in light of the changes. Just write what you would say now in the margin."
>
> Students began perking up. They seemed to feel more confident about their own roles once Monika had taken action. One boy [said], "You know, I can see that I'm here, this is my group on the paper. But it's hard for me to remember *how* people said things to see what they really meant. ... Can, do you think we could hear the tapes?" That was the moment when everyone became very animated.... All of them moved from responding to what they were being asked to do for the team and began discussing how they wanted to participate in the research. (Campher et al., 1996, pp. 18–19)

Monika's question, which manifested her dual role as informant and coresearcher, catapulted the group into a new understanding of how to think about the use of data collected in an ongoing action–research–action cycle. It also put students in a position to use their skills as readers and rewriters of word and world: What was written was not cast in stone but ripe for critical reading and transformation.

As the TSMC team continued to meet with students, analyzing, revising, and embroidering data, students began to hone their perspectives on issues central

to the reform such as assessment, standards, and accountability. Here is what Nicole, an AMY student, said about these issues:

> [The teachers] know in their heads what they want. They just don't sit down and put it all together at the beginning of the year. They just sort of spring it on us whenever they finish something. They act as though we should understand it all, but they forget we aren't going through it all with them. One teacher tells me one thing about what it means to be "exemplary" and another one tells me the same thing is "proficient." I think they should all agree before you get one telling you one thing and another teacher telling you something else.

Linnie Jones, a parent and AMY Home and School President, recalled how really listening to Carl, an AMY student, led her to hear another version of the assessment story:

> I listened to Carl with the ears of a parent who had a very clear idea of what his teachers thought they were telling him. I heard him very clearly accept that he was not going to walk down the aisle at graduation because even though he had work to put in his portfolio, he did not put it there because he didn't know he had to do it. Teachers were very quick to say that he knew he was supposed to do it, that they had told him. But as a mother, I know that there is a lot of space between what an adult tells a child and what he actually hears or can take in, especially when he has to hear quite a few messages without being able to act for himself.
>
> "I understand now that I was supposed to put things in my portfolio myself. But I needed someone to walk me through it. I hadn't done it before. I thought they were going to tell me how to do it." It was the first time Carl had heard the word portfolio, let alone had any say in what went into what used to be called his folder. He was used to grown-ups telling him what to do and going along with the different demands of different adults to see his way through.

As a parent member of a qualitative research team, Jones used the self-reflexivity of current ethnographers as a strategy, reflecting on her own experience as a parent rather than accusing teachers of not listening to students. This opens up the possibility of real cross-role dialogue. Similarly, later in the process, Gold reflected, "I guess none of us is as student-centered [in our classrooms] as we'd like to think." Sitting with teachers, parents, principal, and CUE researcher, she leaves interestingly ambiguous the identity of the *us*, trusting cross-role participants to join rather than distance her reflexivity. Also left ambiguous is the question of whose work it would be to make classrooms more student centered.

Positioned initially as informants, this cohort of articulate students continued to speak and listen, read and write about their experience of school as they approached graduation. They offered collective critique framed in ways acceptable to adults and so moved with relative ease into coresearcher roles, even as several among them teetered on the verge of not completing the eighth grade. By the end of the year they had worked with adults on the TSMC team to generate the following list of recommendations for faculty.

1. Recommendations for consistency:

   - Make standards, expectations, and practices very clear across the grades and subject areas at the beginning of the year. (Use

language for students rather than for teachers.)
- Give students rubrics at the beginning of the year. Spend time to show how they work and plan strategies so students can learn to use them for all work.
- Make sixth- and seventh-grade work lead into the demands of eighth-grade exit requirements.

2. Recommendations for accountability:

- Find out whether teachers are doing what they claim they are doing if they say students are not doing work or are performing below proficiency.
- Make sure that the same standards and expectations of work are similar from teacher to teacher and are clearly understood by students.
- Show that it matters that everyone becomes successful so students whose intelligence is high but whose pride is low have a chance and ... can do much better than expected. Provide support for talented, intelligent, but unmotivated students who have no source of outside support or encouragement. Show you care ... so students don't drop out.
- Offer students choices to allow them to do their best work. Consult with students about plans.

The students with the TSMC team planned a presentation to staff during lunch time, but teacher attendance was disappointing. In another effort to share their learnings, the team videotaped a conversation with student-researchers. Students also traveled to research conferences where adult audiences delighted in the opportunity to hear adolescents constructively critique schooling. Adults' questions stimulated students' ongoing thinking about students' roles in research and reform, as reflected in their comments when they returned to AMY for follow-up focus groups. Eventually several of the students' recommendations made their way into practice, although Mason cautioned:

> There is and was no simple cause and effect between what the team could see in the data and constant revision of changes. Faculty did not reevaluate narratives or propose standards *because of* student recommendations.... What the data showed was the need to take into account how to bridge the gap between professional objectives and their practical incorporation by seeing how students were responding to the initiatives. (Campher et al., 1996, pp. 21–22)

Critical Literacy Learners and Activists

The eighth graders of Cohort I included students who were high achievers in school and students who were having difficulty with academic reading and writing. Although this research project was not a required activity, students representing the full range of the academic spectrum participated in each phase of the inquiry. Construed as stages in a problem-posing critical literacy process, these phases might be understood as follows:

1. In Phase I, students explored their thinking orally, listening to each other and bouncing off each other's ideas as they generated a collective picture of their school experience. Adults asked and listened, often pushing for clarification, elaboration, and examples.

language for students rather than for teachers.)
- Give students rubrics at the beginning of the year. Spend time to show how they work and plan strategies so students can learn to use them for all work.
- Make sixth- and seventh-grade work lead into the demands of eighth-grade exit requirements.

2. Recommendations for accountability:

- Find out whether teachers are doing what they claim they are doing if they say students are not doing work or are performing below proficiency.
- Make sure that the same standards and expectations of work are similar from teacher to teacher and are clearly understood by students.
- Show that it matters that everyone becomes successful so students whose intelligence is high but whose pride is low have a chance and ... can do much better than expected. Provide support for talented, intelligent, but unmotivated students who have no source of outside support or encouragement. Show you care ... so students don't drop out.
- Offer students choices to allow them to do their best work. Consult with students about plans.

The students with the TSMC team planned a presentation to staff during lunch time, but teacher attendance was disappointing. In another effort to share their learnings, the team videotaped a conversation with student-researchers. Students also traveled to research conferences where adult audiences delighted in the opportunity to hear adolescents constructively critique schooling. Adults' questions stimulated students' ongoing thinking about students' roles in research and reform, as reflected in their comments when they returned to AMY for follow-up focus groups. Eventually several of the students' recommendations made their way into practice, although Mason cautioned:

> There is and was no simple cause and effect between what the team could see in the data and constant revision of changes. Faculty did not reevaluate narratives or propose standards *because of* student recommendations.... What the data showed was the need to take into account how to bridge the gap between professional objectives and their practical incorporation by seeing how students were responding to the initiatives. (Campher et al., 1996, pp. 21–22)

Critical Literacy Learners and Activists

The eighth graders of Cohort I included students who were high achievers in school and students who were having difficulty with academic reading and writing. Although this research project was not a required activity, students representing the full range of the academic spectrum participated in each phase of the inquiry. Construed as stages in a problem-posing critical literacy process, these phases might be understood as follows:

1. In Phase I, students explored their thinking orally, listening to each other and bouncing off each other's ideas as they generated a collective picture of their school experience. Adults asked and listened, often pushing for clarification, elaboration, and examples.

2. In Phase II, over the course of an academic year students read and heard their own voices, engaging in a dialogue that involved identifying key themes and elaborating and revising these over the time period of their academic year. Adults provided texts and strategies to support students' inquiry. For example, adults used students' discussion of a "generative theme" as a basis for selecting representative quotes, which then provided a next text to work with.

3. In Phase III, students drafted and presented a set of recommendations for school improvement planning. Adults provided support for this as well as settings and audiences for student actions.

In this case, students' research into their own learning both engaged them as critical literacy learners and provided data to help chart the course of school reform at AMY. Likewise, this school reform effort provided a site where a heterogeneous group of students engaged in several crucial aspects of problem posing and critical literacy learning, as they used their own experiences to question, hypothesize, and reexamine, and honed their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in the creation of a collective text.

On the other hand, the case also leaves us with some difficult questions: Why didn't the school utilize the students' research and recommendations more directly and fully? What is the meaning of critical literacy learning that stands outside the curriculum, so that, for example, when Carl and several others in the cohort failed to complete portfolio requirements, their work on this research project did not help them march down the aisle? How might this work in itself help to prepare students for high school?

During the following year, four Cohort I students, now alumni, participated with the AMY team in a public presentation about their action research. Listening to these students, principal Holly Perry thought she heard an answer to their initial research question:

> Two particular student voices stood out. Monika said, "AMY prepared me for high school because I can deal with people better than before. I didn't have a high tolerance for people. I didn't have an attitude or anything ... I'd just rather stay in a room with a hundred animals. Now I can communicate with people and work in groups ... " I laughed to myself and remembered the changes in Monika from a quiet observer to a young woman who could put her ideas across forcefully yet with consideration of another's point of view. Later ... Monika ... said, "At AMY you could have a conversation with anyone, the principal, the teachers. In high school there was a big change. In a way AMY hurt me; well, not exactly hurt me.... At AMY if I had a problem I'd go talk to the teacher but in high school the teachers have the thinking role ... 'Hey, I'm the teacher, you're the student, you listen.' Recently I had a problem with the teacher and I said, 'Hey can't we talk about it,' and he's like, 'No!' So that part was difficult."
>
> The second student whose voice stood out for me was Carl's. I was surprised and pleased to hear him speak at length because in the three years at AMY, he had struck me as a quiet youngster who rarely spoke out. At the end of the conference, a member of the audience asked, "What responsibility do kids have when they get to high school to make them more like AMY? Have you given any thought to preparing kids to be change agents?" My stomach tightened and I thought angrily, why should kids have to bear that risk, we adults need to assume our responsibility to change schools before we send kids in to get chewed up ... Carl [said], "I've been talking to my teachers trying to

> make a change for the students who have to stay there because their parents believe in public schools. My mom believes in public schools and wants me to stay. But some of the teachers don't care if you leave or if you stay. They don't want to hear your opinions or what you have to say. That was a change for me. I try to talk to my teachers, the counselor, the principal but I don't know that I'll get through. I'm trying."
>
> [Later] as we shared our memories of what stood out for us during our two years of research, I began to think about the school's mission statement. I wondered if our student data would correlate with our stated vision.... Our school's Mission Statement says: "The mission of the Academy for the Middle Years (NW) is to create a learning-centered community actively engaged in quality learning and preparation for success in a changing, diverse world." I began to realize that the students *were* providing an answer as to whether we are doing what we say we are doing and whether that is preparing youngsters for high school. (Campher et al., 1996, pp. 23–24)

The principal ends with a question that makes the connection between strengthening one's voice and changing schools explicit: How do we expand our evaluation methods to capture and validate youngsters' finding their own voices and taking risks to change schools so that others might also experience such success? Her question makes critical literacy a legitimate educational goal, acknowledging students' work and urging educators to count this work in the terms of schooling. Corbett and Wilson (1995) argued that "students must change during reform, not just as a consequence of it" (p. 12). We see students' inquiry into their experiences as both method and outcome, and would add that adults can legitimate students' role redefinition by construing their inquiry into schooling as part of the curriculum.

Working with Cohort I students as coresearchers taught the team how to teach critical literacy skills, as the students offered insights and flagged gaps in the inquiry. It also taught the adults that including students' voices in the reform conversation was necessary, in fact crucial as an initial step, but not in itself sufficient. Agency had to be redistributed in the process. Students' work had to be integrated into other school agendas in order to sustain change efforts. Academy for the Middle Years had moved beyond offering students the piecemeal participation of planning dances to inviting their critical commentary. The team considered next steps, including how to bring students into the governance process as well as how to weave action research into both the curriculum and schoolwide decision making. As critical literacy learners, Cohort I students went on to high school, taking with them an evolving investigative stance toward their schooling.

COHORT II: DISSONANCE

In the second year of research, eighth-grade participants delivered critiques that were harsher, more multivoiced and contradictory, and generally harder to interpret than their peers in the first year. Like Cohort I, these Cohort II students saw themselves as guinea pigs of AMY school reform; unlike that earlier group, however, these students were less articulate about what was positive in their school experience, tending instead to position school staff as the other whose authority restricts. One student explained her frustration with the passive student role: "Everybody has a certain way of thinking out things but the teachers always want you to do what they want ... do it *their* way." Another noted,

"[The teachers] always seem to find something wrong with [your work]."

Interestingly, the adult roles were different for Cohorts I and II. Because of the splitting of TSMC from the whole-school projects of restructuring in accord with standards and developing interdisciplinarity as well as to outside factors distracting the attention of parent and RFA researchers, adults on the AMY team began working with this cohort of students later in the school year. Likewise, this cohort's work ended abruptly and with significantly less follow-up. As one parent later put it, "We did not cultivate the same level of rapport (with Cohort II) as with Cohort I. It was easier to suppress or sanitize a good deal of the hard stuff and anger in Cohort I at times because we were much more connected."

Struggling with Student Critique

Although this second cohort of students may have framed their critique with less grace than Monika and her peers, in initial focus groups they raised many of the same issues, pointing to such issues as the pressure to produce and perform as sometimes at odds with real learning. For example, the experimentation of AMY with innovative assessments continued to trouble students:

Researcher: If you were talking with a friend who was interested in coming to AMY, tell me something you would tell them about the school.

Student 1: I wouldn't tell them to come here because they always trying to be different with holistic device and all that stuff. What's that—a 4, a 5, a 2?

Researcher: What's a holistic device?

Student 2: An assessment thing.

Student 1: This is the first school I know that did this.

Student 3: How come they don't just give us an A or B or something?

Researcher: How come you don't like this always being different?

Student 1: Because they're always trying to be different so they can be special. Just be a school. They always got to be different—talking about some holistic school thing, CLUE courses, and humanities, and EASE. What's EASE?

Although as a group Cohort I had acknowledged the value of challenging work, this group of students offered contradictory data, complaining on the one hand that "It's much harder [than the neighborhood schools] ... I wouldn't recommend it," and on the other that "There's only one teacher in there that pushes us the way that they should."

The data emerging from these early focus groups raised painful but important questions for the adult team. How could adults hear what these students were saying? And, how could they stretch their students—to listen to each other, to negotiate among themselves a common set of meanings, and to express their perspectives so that the school community could hear them?

When the adult team members met to discuss this second set of transcripts, they struggled with what and how to learn from words like *stupid* or *boring* that students used to describe their school experiences as well as from contradictory data. Their frustration with data that seemed opaque at best and demoralizing at worst led the team to invent research

strategies that would put the responsibility back on the students to clarify their meanings. As parent Bonnie Mason pointed out, "Just because something was posited as 'evidence of learning' did not necessarily mean that it measured learning." Adult staff members were particularly challenged to resist a school culture of blame and instead cultivate a culture of accountability.

At a next session, Cohen, the RFA researcher, and Mason, a parent researcher, asked the 18 students seated around tables in the library to write a brief definition of caring at AMY in order to elaborate and make sense of contradictions that had emerged in transcripts. Then students read aloud, listening for themes and patterns emerging in their collective text. The following excerpts suggest how students' written texts began to crack open their codes of expression:

> To me caring means when you feel so down and out and when someone picks up your spirit. And say care about yourself because if you don't no one will. In AMY I feel a lot of love and care because the teachers always stay on your back for you can make some progress. And that's caring.

> My definition of caring is you listen to what people have to say, you respect their wishes and even if you don't get along you grade their work on performance and not on behavior.

> Caring is when someone tries to understand to the best of their ability your problems. This is not something I feel is expressed by the teachers at AMY.

> Caring to me is when someone watches out for you and wants to see you succeed. A lot of the teachers at our school care about how we do but others don't really or it doesn't seem like it.

Cohen and Mason explained that the adult team needed to enlist students as coresearchers in order to understand students' perspectives on school. Students would take field notes in their classes, lunch, hallways, and at recess, then discuss these at the next meeting. Students began to fidget and whisper. Finally one girl put the question: "Do we have to?" Recalling the adult team's insistence on requiring students to take a more active role in the research, Cohen nodded: Taking field notes would be a requirement for continuation in the research group.

The 13 students who attended the next session—mostly with field notes in front of them—perused their notes to identify the descriptive words they had used most often in their classroom observations. Mason and Cohen invited discussion of these words, pushing for examples to elucidate individual and collective meanings. In the problem-posing framework, the group was searching for key words that would codify shared experiences and so "act as discussion starters for critical thinking" (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 35).

Students' negative words included already familiar terms such as *boring,* which several defined as "picky on teachers' parts, like what line you write your name on." Another negative word was *stupid,* defined as "inappropriate, not clear," and "doesn't make sense." But interestingly, the most frequently used negative descriptor was *tension,* which the group defined as involving "pressure, frustration, disintegration," and "headaches." Tension came from so much to do in so little time and from teachers' high expectations based on their perceptions of students' ability and expressed in the troublesome "I know you can do better." Much of this was strikingly consistent with findings from Cohort I as well as with the research of Farrell and his student collaborators (Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, & White, 1988), who reported

at-risk adolescents' descriptions of school in terms of boredom and pressure.

Unlike Farrell's students, though, Cohort II students at AMY also attached positive words to their descriptions of school. These included *into it, paying attention, doing well,* and *easy*. Although these terms assumed a habitual model for assessing school by product or outcome, the group began to weave in examples to construct their meanings. In one instance, a number of students contributed to what became a rich description of a change in one of their classes. During much of the year, they had read assigned books with assigned, "stupid" questions. Recently, though, they had read a book that they were all into. As they talked, it emerged that they had two reasons to be excited about this book. One had to do with the book itself being a compelling read. The second was about pedagogy. Class was structured differently now, so that rather than answering assigned questions, students themselves were raising the questions that guided class sessions.

At the end of this meeting, on a clear, warm May afternoon, students were responding excitedly to Mason's field notes from the day she shadowed one of them. The notes pointed out that "the physical design of a classroom, a long and very narrow room, contributed to students congregating by race or gender in self-assigned seats." Student-researchers began to debate who sat with whom, where, and why. Although this beginning was also an ending, as the year rushed to a finish, these students working in the context of the cross-role team of adults guiding their research had begun to use the ethnographic process of self-reflexivity to open up critical dialogue as a process for change.

Critical Literacy Learners

Teacher Pat DeBrady described the gap between student and adult perspectives on school:

> We [adult team members] have come to realize that two distinct realities function within the same space and rarely do the inhabitants of either realm view the emperor's raiment with the same eyes. Repeatedly, students (in focus group interviews) decried what they saw as an unreasonable emphasis on producing work which instructional staff regarded as evidence of learning. (Campher et al., 1996, p. 15)

Whose job would it be to bridge this gap? Who will lend inhabitants of either realm the frames, lenses, and language to view schooling from each other's perspectives, a task that seems foundational both to meaningful reform and to critical literacy?

Although in initial focus groups the students of Cohort I learned quickly to use their individual experiences to forge a collective voice, Cohort II students remained stubbornly multivoiced—attaching a plethora of meanings to the same few terms. Likewise, although Cohort I students were able to communicate their shared concerns effectively to adults on the team and outside the school, the words of Cohort II seemed to set off a cacophony, in some instances splitting the adult TSMC team and challenging school-based adults in their effort to listen to students and try to make sense of what they were saying, even when it seemed to contradict adult perspectives or intent.

In an examination of stances taken by feminist researchers, Fine (1992) described the use of adolescents' voices to convey institutional critique as "a sophisticated form of ventriloquy, with lots of manipulation required" (p. 216). The adult researcher reinserts herself to construe particular meanings to adolescents' compelling narratives. In school self-study, this strategy of analysis and presentation remains seductive and, yet, would defeat the very purpose of the project, eclipsing both learnings that

would inform school change and potential gains for adolescents as literacy learners.

Because of their investment in their students and their school, adults on the TSMC team had to push their students beyond their initial passes at institutional critique. They had to require that students become researchers—committing observations and interpretations to paper; discussing, clarifying and negotiating their perspectives; and constructing collective if not harmonious texts. For teachers, this involved entering into the painful and nonlinear process of reflecting on dissonances in their practice. For RFA researchers and parents, this involved the episodic and sometimes uncomfortable step into a position of authority as teacher who holds high expectations for all students in the project.

Wallerstein's (1987) problem-posing methodology engages students in generating critical themes and participating in dialogue that leads to reflective action. In the case of Cohort II, in order to actualize the potential for student participation in school reform on the one hand and adolescent critical literacy learning on the other, it was necessary for students to learn to become translators of their adolescent language and meanings. Adults had to learn to coach students to become translators. Both students and adults had to take a leap of faith that pressing adolescents to translate their perspectives for adult consumption would not simply "provide a blind for unacknowledged adult paradox" (B. Mason, personal communication, October 19, 1996). To scaffold this leap, adult team members had to acknowledge their own assumptions and connotations as playing a role in their variable success with deciphering students' meanings; come up with strategies for helping students to explore, clarify, and express their meanings, both individually and collectively; and support a schoolwide commitment to continue to listen to students' experiences, even when this was difficult.

Students both resisted and relished their new role. Writing about what caring meant in their environment was a task many seemed to find amenable; this kind of reflective discourse may have drawn on the fluency that Delpit (1993) suggested African American youngsters bring to literacy learning. However, the next tasks—taking field notes on what was going on at school and then meeting to analyze what they were seeing and how they were describing their experiences—required students to travel back and forth between their own and adults' meaning systems, a challenging and uncertain proposition.

Delpit (1993) described a situation in which Native Alaskan students compared the rules of standard English with what the teacher called Our Heritage Language. In this way, the streams of what Willis (1995) called functional literacy and critical literacy learning intersect. This pedagogy serves a dual purpose, equipping students to participate in the culture of power and challenging a hegemony of language and power. For the Cohort II adolescents, mixed by race, ethnicity, and geography and pulled together for the explicit purpose of informing school change, the imperative to translate their perspectives into adult language also served a dual purpose. Students stood to gain a greater collective voice in an institution positioned to decide for and about them, as they simultaneously gained awareness of language and its relation to experience through practice of skills such as comparing, defining, and distinguishing.

A teacher reader of this chapter immediately recognized the students of Cohort II as similar to many of his own students, and underscored the importance of conducting inquiry into schooling with these students to promote both

their literacy learning and their schools' improvement. Reflecting on these students' work raises another set of issues and questions about school reform as a site for adolescents' critical literacy learning: What happens when adolescents are skeptical about taking on the role of critical partner with adults engaged in changing schools, a skepticism that would seem reasonable given adolescents' traditional positioning in their schooling? Or to look at this issue from another perspective, how do we build students' and adults' capacity to put our beliefs on hold in order to engage in "listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds" (Delpit, 1993, p. 139), as a prerequisite not to Delpit's call for dialogue among adults but to dialogue across the constituencies of teachers, parents, and students? Again, how can this work be taken from the margins into the curriculum—so that engagement with school change can become a legitimate strand of adolescent literacy learning in English and social studies classes, for example—while retaining its authenticity?

REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Student voices are critical to school reform. Adolescents, particularly middle schoolers, are well positioned to lend their insight and partnership in the effort to change schools for the better, an effort by nature complex and ongoing. Their participation in this effort requires that adolescents develop their critical literacy skills so that they can express critique cogently and clearly, redefining their roles to remain in charge of their own meanings rather than turning over the task of interpreting their "voices" to adults who have claimed to "know better." The requisite skills argue for the inclusion of this work in the curriculum.

As teaching and learning can be cast as forms of research, so can research be cast as teaching and learning. Shor (1987) described it this way:

> A critically literate person does not stay at the empirical level of memorizing data, or at the impressionistic level of opinion, or at the level of dominant myths in society, but goes beneath the surface to understand the origin, structure, and consequences of any body of knowledge, technical process, or object under study. *This model of literacy establishes teaching and learning as forms of research and experimentation,* testing hypotheses, examining items, questioning what we know. In addition, teaching/learning as research suggests that teachers constantly observe students' learning, to make pedagogical decisions, while students are also researching their language, their society, and their own learning. (p. 24, italics added)

We seek to reconceptualize adolescent literacy in the critical, problem-posing terms of Freire, Shor, Wallerstein, and others. Thus, adolescents engage collectively in generating the themes from their reading of the world, dialogue on the meanings and implications of key terms and images, and try out implications of their meanings through reflective actions. We add the notion of translation as an aspect of critical literacy learning that is especially cogent for adolescents negotiating meaning and change with adult partners in school reform. Further, although each cohort of students represented a range in terms of prior academic achievement, the two cohorts took up their positions as student researchers quite differently, demanding of the adult team different support strategies. We might expect that, like other teaching and learning experiences, episodes of critical literacy will vary with various groups of students.

In our work with students, teachers, parents, and principals involved in Philadelphia school reform, we have come to realize that it is not enough to solicit students' voices periodically and then have adults speculate on their meaning. As AMY parent Linne Jones says of Carl in another situation but applicable here as well, "He was used to having grown-ups tell him what to do." Students need to continue talking and listening, reading and writing in order to clarify their meanings, negotiate their differences, and insinuate their voices into school reform. Such skills are at the heart of literacy learning. School reform can provide a site for students to exercise these skills, but how do schools ensure that students' voices will be heard and make a difference?

AMY is a real school actively facing the host of troubling dilemmas that public institutions encounter in dealing with youth in the 1990s. The work of AMY with adolescents as critical literacy learners seems to us to carry important implications for moving the school reform agenda forward. Although conflict will remain a part of any setting where people care passionately, bringing cross-role adults into sustained dialogue with students allows the behaviors and assumptions that constitute the deep structure of schooling to rise to the surface. We contend that this critical step, facilitated by collective research that reveals assumptions in light of data, is necessary for shared buy-in to the process of reculturing that is essential for profound and sustainable change. Further, the stances of adults at all levels of the system committed to change over the long haul—teachers willing to learn and parents to teach, leadership invested in an action-reflection cycle—can create the conditions necessary and, with adequate resources, sufficient to democratic reform.

How can educators support students' role redefinitions in this process? The worries of teacher Bill Bigelow (1990) and principal Holly Perry (Campher et al., 1996) carry the important admonition that redefining students' roles in their education is no straightforward task: We must be wary of handing adolescents an exercise in frustration on the one hand or an overwhelming responsibility on the other. When Branscombe and Thomas (1992) considered the outcomes of Thomas' literacy learning years after her schooling, they described not only her literacy skills but also the way she used these skills to step back from institutions, gaining distance in order to assess her approach. This critical stance allowed her to reflect on and modify her role in relation to key institutions in her life. We think that this process is crucial to the kind of critical literacy learning this chapter addresses and that adults can and must initiate such a process with adolescents. As parent Linnie Jones recalled:

> I didn't think [having students as coresearchers] was a frill ... I believed that the students had very valuable information to offer that we might never hear unless we asked. So I wasn't surprised to hear one student comment about her participation in Taking Stock/Making Change, "I didn't realize I was thinking clearly about these things until you asked the questions." (Campher et al., 1996, p. 6)

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