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Editor's Introduction

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Providing Hope and Critique through Art, Activism, and Literacies

You might have seen circulating on Facebook the resignation recently written by a teacher called [“Why I quit.”](#) I hope after reading this issue, you'll be convinced to stay—in teaching, in teacher education, and/or in your role as a community activist. Because what I've read in these pages and what I experienced at the JoLLE Spring Conference has inspired me, and reconfirmed my commitment to stay in education—in spite of the high-stakes testing and increasing corporatization of education.

This issue is the combined result of work from many, many students/educators/activists. Briefly, I'd like to tell the story of how this issue came into being. While attending the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Conference in Vancouver last year, I attended many sessions that positioned teachers as atheoretical. It's no surprise to see teacher-bashing in the popular media, but I was disappointed to see so many professors of education, presumably once classroom teachers themselves, continue to view teachers in terms of their deficits. So, it was with great pleasure that I attended the symposium entitled “Activist Literacies: Theorizing Literacy in and Across Communities of Practice” (Simon, Campano, Yee, Ghiso, Sánchez, & Low, 2012). In this symposium, Simon, Campano et al. articulated their conception of activist literacies as drawing from the rich practice teachers were immersed in and the theories they developed from this practice. I am thrilled that Simon and Campano were able to contribute their article, “Activist Literacies: Teacher Research as Resistance to the “Normal Curve” to this Spring, 2013 issue.

When it came time for me, and Conference Co-Chair, Tobie Bass, to choose a theme for the inaugural JoLLE Spring Conference, our own activist work came to mind. We had joined a collaboration of people embroiled in battling the harsh anti-immigration discourses and policies being enacted in Georgia. There were so many students and educators working at the intersections of activism and literacy who inspired us to envision the JoLLE Spring Conference as a platform to give voice to the important work we witnessed going on all around us, both locally and globally. We felt that Simon and Campano's idea of *activist literacies* would provide a fitting theme for our conference. Tobie and I had taken several doctoral courses together, in which we wrestled with the disconnect that we saw between academic discourse and the realities

many teachers face. We questioned how we might engage with our community, schools, and teachers in more productive and participatory ways.

Our theme for the conference, “Activist Literacies: Inspire, Engage, Create, Transform” asked participants to consider the changing nature of literacy in the 21st century and the emerging pedagogical and theoretical issues arising from these changes. Working within the rich tradition of critical literacy (Freire, 1970) and drawing on the concept of *activist literacies* (Simon, Campano, Yee, Ghiso, Sánchez, & Low, 2012; Simon, Campano, Broderick, & Pantoja, 2012), we asked contributors working at the intersections of activism and literacy to describe the ways they were using multiple and multimodal literacies, and arts and performance-based literacies to enact change within their communities.

Our goal for the conference was to establish connections across institutional borders with high school students, teachers, graduate students, university faculty, community members, and scholars. Tobie Bass, a passionate advocate for undocumented students, reached out to many community contacts and developed reciprocal partnerships with several literacy organizations in our local community. Her efforts included recruiting teachers, students, and community members to join in sharing their ideas about literacy and activism. The opening conference reception featured a Gallery Walk during which conference presenters from near and far exhibited their work. The Gallery Walk included local third grade students' story quilts based on the book *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold, a digital story narrated by adult learners who shared their journeys and perceptions of literacy, high school students who shared their advocacy work titled #undocufiles and (re)presenting, and many more. Our “[Conference Reflections](#)” section highlights several conference presenters' diverse experiences, perspectives, and voices.

The JoLLE Spring Conference was planned in order to produce this Spring, 2013 issue. As such it reflects the conference theme of activist literacies, and includes both scholarship from the conference and additional articles submitted that work within this theme. Producing this issue in the short time between the February conference and the release of this issue required great and considerable efforts from the whole of the editorial board, who deserve acknowledgement for their contributions to the conference and to this issue.

In this issue's forum, “Undocumented Students and Classroom Advocacy: Be Not Afraid,” Ian Altman contrasts his experiences advocating on behalf of his undocumented students with the conservative rhetoric of the Common Core State Standards, ultimately showing how disrupting students' thinking is in and of itself a kind of activism. Ian, along with his colleague, Matt Hicks, have been tireless advocates and activists, writing articles to raise public awareness, testifying at the state capitol, and [helping their undocumented students apply and gain entrance to college](#). They were recently awarded the Kenneth S. Goodman “In Defense of Good Teaching Award.” We were honored that both Matt and Ian were able to attend and present at the JoLLE Spring Conference, along with several of their students.

Our features section begins with “Language, Literacy, and Culture: Aha! Moments in Personal and Sociopolitical Understanding,” in which Sonia Nieto shares how her understanding of sociocultural theory has influenced the way she thinks about teaching and learning. Drawing on her experiences growing up the child of immigrant parents, Nieto discusses how teachers and the traditional discourses of schooling positioned her and her family as “culturally deprived” and “at-risk.” Nieto shares that one of her biggest “aha! moments” was the realization “that education

is always political, that is, that whatever pedagogy or practice we use inevitably says something about our ideology". In the words of Freire, "All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator's part . . . It could not be otherwise" (Freire, 1985, p. 43). Nieto's article serves as a compelling entry point into the multiple ways that educators are thinking about how education is always political, and the various ways participants and presenters in the JoLLE Spring Conference and in this special issue take up the term activist literacies.

In "Activist Literacies: Teacher Research as Resistance to the "Normal Curve," Simon and Campano draw on disability studies to show how teachers can work against the constructed notion of the "normal curve" in their unique contexts. Like Nieto, they are concerned about how narrow views of literacy can serve to further marginalize diverse students, and argue for an approach to literacy that allows a fuller picture of the practices and potentials of each student. Simon and Campano move beyond a critique of ideology by offering three examples of how teachers have disrupted and resisted the "normal curve" by turning their literacy classrooms into sites of activism. Further, they discuss the challenges and opportunities teachers face when they attempt to work both within and against structural inequities in the educational system.

Several articles in this issue are from presenters at the JoLLE Spring Conference, including "Activist Literacies: Validating Aboriginality Through Visual and Literary Identity Texts," by Kristiina Montero, Cassandra Bice-Zaugg, and *Makwa Oshkwenh*-Adam Cyril John Marsh. In this article, the authors use Indigenous research methodologies to examine the ways in which a university-based researcher (Montero), worked collaboratively with Aboriginal youth (Bice-Zaugg and Marsh) to explore a school-based project centered on Aboriginal identity. In this year-long project, students worked on creating visual and written *identity texts* (Cummins & Early, 2011), which involved preservice teachers and Aboriginal youth creating paintings together. Later, the students offered insights on what the painting experience meant to them. Viewing the students' artwork and hearing how the experience changed their lives highlighted the spiritual and emotional aspects so often undervalued and under-represented in research.

KC Nat Turner, Kate Way, and Robin R.R. Gray continue the theme of art and activism in their article "The Transformative Power of Youth Action Coalition's Multimodal Arts-for-Change Programming." Turner, Way, and Gray analyze the potentials for learning made available through three programs from the Youth Action Coalition: Video Vanguards, Girls' Eye View, Get Up Get Down. The authors found that the programs helped students develop tools for critically analyzing both the art and media they view. The multimedia projects youth created in these programs also helped them develop identities that were future-oriented, and provided them with opportunities to engage in shared civic dialogue with community members.

Limor Pinhasi-Vittorio and Sarah Vernola next ask how the integration of arts into a graduate literacy course impacted students' awareness of social justice and critical thinking in "The Arts to Encourage Multiple Perspectives and Promote Social Justice." Pinhasi-Vittorio and Vernola found that incorporating aesthetic experiences helped students understand how texts can have multiple meanings. Creating artwork in response to literature helped students to consider alternative perspectives and develop empathy through imagination.

In "Embodied Discourse: Using Tableau to Explore Preservice Teachers' Reflections and Activist Stances," Margaret Branscombe and Jenifer Jasinski Schneider discuss how they used tableau as "reflection-in-action" to help the preservice teachers they work with imagine alternate

realities for various scenarios. In doing so, Branscombe and Schneider found that the preservice teachers became more empathetic to students' perspectives. Drawing on the work of Friere and Boal, the authors conclude that drama can be considered an activist literacy because it seeks to both confront and transform reality.

Sally Humphrey, who traveled to the JoLLE Spring Conference from Australia, discusses her on-going research working with a group of teachers who are implementing genre-based pedagogies into their middle school classrooms in her article, "Empowering adolescents for activist literacies." Humphrey uses systemic functional linguistics as a tool to analyze the rhetorical and grammatical devices adolescents use in their writing about political issues. Through this close grammatical study she seeks to make visible "powerful versions of literacy" (Collins & Halverson, 2009).

Children's Literature Section

This issue also features a special section on Children's Literature. In "Children's Literature as Tools of and for Activism: Reflections of JoLLE's inaugural Activist Literacies conference," Jennifer Graff provides a rich articulation of the ways in which she witnessed children's literature enriching, extending, complementing, and complicating the concept of activist literacies at the JoLLE Spring Conference. Graff discusses the ways that children's literature exemplars can provide counternarratives for the act of reading, and provides specific titles and authors for readers to reference. She also provides a list of specific children's literature texts and authors that include activist themes. Her article will be a helpful resource to both university educators as well as practicing teachers and media specialists.

In "Launching Youth Activism with Award-Winning International Literature," Danielle E. Forest, Sue C. Kimmel, and Kasey L. Garrison analyze international children's books that have received the Mildred L. Batchelder Award and Honor. The authors identify a number of social justice issues appearing in the texts, and found a continuum of depictions of activism ranging from what Simon and Norton call "true activism" to calls for action. In identifying this continuum, Forest, Kimmel, and Kasey, highlight the difficulty in defining what "counts" and what doesn't count as activism. The authors suggest that these titles offer a starting point for engaging young children in discussions of social inequalities that may lead to engaging in activist causes.

In "Latino media and critical literacy pedagogies: Children's scripting Telenovelas discourses," Carmen L. Medina and María del Rocío Costa examine how a group of third graders in Puerto Rico responded when a popular text of from their own lives, a Spanish television genre called telenovelas, became the center of their classroom curriculum. Using classroom critical literacy and performative inquiry, Medina and del Rocío seek to "make visible the complex and multilayered relationship between media, power and identity." The authors found that as students critically analyzed the telenovelas, and produced one themselves, they became active agents in responding to global media. Students were able to read across a variety of texts in dynamic ways. Like Simon and Campano, Medina and del Rocío Costa emphasize the importance of viewing critical literacy as lived experience. In other words, it is imperative that educators move beyond the notion of critical literacy as a "state of mind" and move into critical literacy as "social practice" (Buckingham, 2003).

In “Discussing Picturebooks Across Perceptual, Structural and Ideological Perspectives” Suzette Youngs and Frank Serafini investigate how readers construct meanings with multimodal picturebooks. The authors discuss how historical fiction picturebooks present additional challenges to young readers because the reader must be able to distinguish between fact and fiction and understand complex historical events. Youngs and Serafini found that students needed additional time and scaffolding in order to move from literal meanings of picturebooks to more ideological meanings. Providing this time and scaffolding ultimately led to greater inferential and symbolic thinking.

In the final piece in the Children’s Literature Section, Denise Davila and Oksana Lushchevska provide their reflections on the Georgia Children’s Book Conference in “Activist Authors of the 44th Annual Georgia Children’s Book Award and Conference.” They describe how the four invited authors and illustrators at the conference engage in literacy activism through the texts they create and through their interactions with readers, teachers, and students.

Looking back, looking forward to 2014

All of the contributors to this special issue have their own unique approach to activism and literacy. What’s particularly interesting to me is the central role that art and performance played in so many of the activist literacies experiences. In putting together this special issue, I found that it became increasingly difficult to sort the submissions in this issue using the labels we’ve always used—Features, Research reports, and Voices from the field, etc. I can only surmise that this difficulty is because the authors in this issue have caused me to rethink what it means to be an activist literacy researcher and to trouble the traditional categories and binaries often used to describe researchers and their “subjects.”

Throughout the entire process of conceptualizing the conference theme and trying to think of ways to connect people and research in innovative ways, I’ve faced a steep learning curve. The biggest lesson (there are many to be sure) I take away from my experience is that the work we do as literacy and language educators can’t be done alone. Working on JoLLE and working so closely with faculty advisor, Peter Smagorinsky, Co-Chair, Tobie Bass, and JoLLE’s hard-working, and dedicated Editorial Board, has been rewarding and affirming beyond my imagination.

I began this editorial with a discussion of how easy it is to become discouraged in the current climate of educational discourse. However, the articles in this issue, because they focus on not only imagining a better future, but also on acting on that imagination, provide me with a sense of hope. As Nieto says, “We also need *hope* because without it, we can become disenchanted, disillusioned, and burned out. Without both critique and hope, teachers are too often swallowed up by a system that is inequitable and hegemonic, that replicates power and privilege, and that rewards students according to their identities and postal codes.” I feel that our special issue provides just what Nieto says we need—both critique and hope. I hope that you’ll continue to join in this on-going conversation by submitting your proposals to the JoLLE 2014 Conference, which will be organized by JoLLE’s new Principal Editor, Stephanie Shelton. Stephanie has been an amazing Production Editor, and I know that she will bring her dedication to purposeful work and her careful attention to detail to future issues of JoLLE.

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