

Activist Literacies: Teacher Research as Resistance to the “Normal Curve”

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“To create one world that encompasses many worlds” – Zapatista phrase

Introduction

At a large public elementary school in a mid-sized city in California, one percent of the student population is designated as “gifted and talented.” Another school, located near a major mid-western university, designates roughly eighty percent of their students as “gifted and talented.” Both are neighborhood schools mainly serving the surrounding communities. At the California school, a pressing concern is acquiring more diagnostic resources to test students and, if necessary, to reclassify them as learners with “special needs.” At the midwestern school, officials are pressed by parents of the “non-gifted,” who are often upset that their children are not counted in the ranks of the “gifted.”

These two schools and their respective institutional constructions of “gifted and talented” and “special needs” illustrate the power of the normal curve. It is perhaps no surprise that the disparities between the schools map onto deeply entrenched social stratifications. The midwestern school, recognized for its high test scores, serves predominantly middle-class and affluent students, many of whom come from families with ties to the nearby university. The students from the California school are predominantly from poor and working-poor families; many have parents who labor in migratory, factory, or low-wage service jobs. There is bountiful evidence of students’ gifts and talents in both communities. Sixth graders in the California school, many of whom are multilingual and engage in rich literacy practices across the various contexts of their lives, have repeatedly placed in a highly competitive academic pentathlon.

Despite severe overcrowding and inadequate facilities, a number of the students have test scores equal to or surpassing their peers across the nation.

There is simply no satisfactory way to justify ethically how students in these two communities—and in many others like them—have been disproportionately categorized, sorted, and offered a disparate set of educational experiences and resources. Yet there is little public outcry. One reason for the lack of protest is that what is constituted as normal varies from context to context. In one school it is “normal” to be remedial. In the other school “normal” is considered the exception, despite marginal—if any—differences in the potentials and capacities of the respective children in these two schools. We suggest that the power and intractability of the idea of “normal” in the two schools is the result of a socially produced and locally instantiated phenomena (school achievement) masquerading as inevitable reality, an ideology that serves to reproduce social inequalities. For literacy educators, consciousness of inequality is only the starting point for resistance, a basis for asking more immediate questions: What happens when literacy classrooms are sites of activism? How do teachers work within and against the systems they are a part of to disrupt or challenge ideologies of social reproduction through the literacy curriculum? How does this involve more capacious understandings of the literate practices students bring to schools? What are the challenges teacher activists face when they strive to work within and against an educational system that is structured around normal curve ideologies? How might we re-envision the variance of student potentials, in a way that is not organized around a hierarchy of academic ability or essentialized notions of intelligence?

This article examines how activist literacy educators enact more socially just practices that run counter to normal curve ideologies. We analyze these examples through the lens of critical theory and disability studies. We build our argument by first suggesting that this resistance must be premised on considering the ideology of the “normal” in education as more than a bad or unjust idea that merely needs to be debunked. It is a deeply ingrained social and material practice that permeates almost every aspect of education and is manifested in a web of interrelated pedagogical policies, practices, and structures. This makes resistance to the normal curve an *aporetic* (Derrida, 1993) endeavor. Everyday acts of resistance require literacy educators to navigate seemingly indissoluble contradictions. Constructive resistance must go beyond a utopian critical rhetoric for a more democratic society and even beyond reasonable calls for teachers to be trained to treat differences differently than deficits. While important, these arguments often remain overly abstract and removed from the real world of classrooms. In this article we explore how activist literacy educators work to challenge the ideologies that undergird social reproduction and enact more equitable educational arrangements.

Teacher/practitioner research, with its emphasis on the intimate relationship between knowledge and teaching, can be a methodological basis for developing rich conceptions of literacy and alternative practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009; Simon, Campano, Broderick, & Pantoja, 2012). Teacher researchers theorize from the thick of things, from actual educational contexts that they shape daily. This informs new practices and educational possibilities for students. Like disability studies, activist teacher research is concerned with the relationship between the built world and social identity and agency. Both frameworks challenge medical models for diagnosing and individuating identities, and emphasize how material structures and social practices stigmatize differences and curtail access to fuller human flourishing. These

perspectives also suggest alternatives. As a methodological stance on classroom practice, practitioner research provides a framework for working against deficit notions of students' identities and literacy practices, and working toward re-envisioning the "normal" in classrooms as intersections of students' multiple worlds of culture, language, experience, and potential. We draw on our own work and the work of other literacy teacher researchers to describe three ways educators resist the normal curve through what we characterize as counter-practices. Drawing on disability studies (e.g., Siebers, 2008; Snyder, Brueggemann & Garland-Thomson, 2002), we analyze how these kinds of resistances characterize different but overlapping understandings of educational access with their own contradictions and possibilities. In our conclusion, we look across the examples to suggest how activist literacies involve challenging the ideological foundations of institutions and practices.

Normal Curve Ideology and Literacy Education

As literacy researchers and former teachers, we are concerned about how deterministic notions of ability and narrow understandings of literacy continue to delimit the learning and life chances of diverse students. A more radically egalitarian understanding of student potentials and variance would entail regarding each student not as an irreducible quantum of ability, but rather as a singular and evolving constellation of capacities, needs, and interests. Furthermore, these constellations are situated within a larger universe: school and classroom communities where the thriving and wellbeing of each student is connected to the flourishing of the whole and, conversely, the devaluing or exclusion of any one individual compromises everyone's cognitive and ethical growth. An alternative educational project, therefore, would have resonances with the vision eloquently phrased by the Zapatistas, which serves as an epigraph for our article: "To create one world that encompasses many worlds."

Like many teachers we have experienced the ways in which narrow notions of students' literate abilities often settle into institutional rationales for school failure. For example, as a first-year teacher Gerald encountered bell-curve ideology in the form of a diagnostic protocol for students referred for extra-resources in his primary classroom. The six-year old children were given two tests: one to measure "cognitive capacity" and the other to evaluate subject-matter proficiency. If there was no disparity between how the students performed on, for example, the reading diagnostic and what they were measured to be innately capable of, they did not qualify for extra support. Gerald recalls advocating for a student who had endured significant trauma in her short life that had clearly impacted her schooling. After going through the referral process, Gerald was informed by the school psychologist that although his student did not qualify for additional support—little surprise in a district that was severely under-resourced—as her regular classroom teacher, he should be proud because the reading tests revealed that she was performing "beyond her abilities."

Over the past decades scholars from a range of disciplines have dismantled the idea of the normal curve, especially in its relation to intelligence. For example, biologist Steven Jay Gould (1981) debunks racist iterations of the bell curve, arguing that variance within groups is more pronounced than variance across them, though this analysis kept the idea of IQ intact. In *Mindset*, Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck (2007) synthesizes decades of research for a popular audience on the personal dynamics of success. She argues that ability is an achievement that

happens over the course of one's life that has more to do with individuals' attitudes towards labels and experiences of success and failure, rather with innate capacity. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1992) has critiqued the link between academic success and intelligence through his interrelated concepts of field, social capital, and habitus. In the popular press, Malcom Gladwell (2008) has observed that exceptional *outliers* are not really outliers at all. According to Gladwell, their success may have less to do with talent, and more to do with some combination of spatio/temporal fortune (being at the right place at the right time), cultural legacy (cast in somewhat essentializing terms), and opportunities for good-old hard work (where Gladwell might have explored social justice issues with more depth and critical nuance).

In education, an industry has developed around the idea of "multiple intelligences" (Gardner, 2008), which is often used to articulate more specific understandings of student abilities and potentials, though each kind of intelligence might, presumably, also be distributed along a demographic bell-curve. Literacy educator Mike Rose's (2005) groundbreaking work emphasizes the cognition skills inherent in working-class jobs, thereby disrupting the exclusive relationship between academics and intelligence. Many teachers have taken an activist stance on addressing these issues. For example, a group of elementary literacy educators associated with Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) issued a bumper sticker that reads: "My child is not a test-score." The incisive slogan critiques the metonymic logic that is often used to dehumanize individuals and groups by having one aspect, quality, or representation stand in for the whole of their value.

Irrespective of whether a critique of bell-curve ideology appears on a bumper sticker or in an academic text, resistance to its influence is easier said than done. Althusser (1971) famously described the ways that ideology is not external to political and social reality—not a realm of "imaginary constructions"—but rather embedded in systems and political apparatuses. In other words, ideology is concretized in, and coextensive with, material experience. Ideological constructs such as the normal curve are not merely abstractions, they imbue social practices and material realities. As Brian Street has (1984) noted, literacy practices are neither neutral nor "autonomous," and as researchers we must be attentive to worldviews and issues of power and identity that underlie them. In the tradition of Althusser, Žižek (1989) has contradicted the image of ideology as "false consciousness," either an invisible, unconscious force or a mask for reality. He argues instead that ideology structures reality and reminds us that it is not enough to be skeptically aware of ideology's machinations. Such consciousness may even be part of its power. Knowing an injustice is taking place may make educators feel all the more helpless, without a productive avenue of resistance.

In literacy education, the ideology of the normal curve reinforces conceptions of individual aptitude, standards, curricula, tracking, and assessment. These practices "hail" or *interpellate* (Althusser, 1971) individuals as particular kinds of students, which can shape their self-conceptions as learners, their performances on various measures that claim to objectively depict their learning or competency, and ultimately their life chances. Some common educational policies and structures are manifestations of the normal curve in more obvious ways, such as grouping, whether organized at the level of districts (magnet schools), schools (tracking), or classrooms (leveled readers). Other policies reinforce the ideology of the normal curve in more subtle ways. For example, if a district has adopted a "scientifically-proven reading program" that

is implemented with “fidelity” and certain students still underperform, then some might conclude that this merely reflects a natural distribution of ability. Further, it implies that educators can resort to remediation, rather than adopting an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) on the rich literacy resources that students’ bring to the classroom.

Resistance as Counter-Practice

Activists and theorists within disability studies (e.g., Siebers, 2008; Snyder, Brueggemann & Garland-Thomson, 2002) have countered the prevailing idea that disability should be individuated as personal defects requiring curing. Alternatively, they have theorized disability as a minoritized identity, one formed in part by socially produced injustices. This has provided grounds for constructing more nuanced understandings of disabled persons, and has also formed the basis of more activist agendas: calls for substantive changes to systems of negative representation and exclusion, as well as changes to disabling social and built environments. Disability studies provide a compelling example of how troubling notions of the normal at the level of ideas is not enough to counteract dehumanizing practices. Claiming disability as a positive social identity, as those within disability studies have effectively done, is a theoretical and political move. It is also a counter-practice, one squarely aimed at improving the quality of life for disabled persons. As this idea of counter-practice suggests, challenging notions of normality that pathologize disability requires a theoretical but also an activist response.

Analogously, statistical norms in education are predicated on the assumption that students can be understood, metonymically, in terms of ability—as represented by scores and outcomes, narrowly constructed—and by extension that students’ prior performances equip teachers with necessary knowledge of their capacities as learners. Recalling the bumper sticker slogan we mentioned earlier, in school practices shaped by normal curve ideology, students are often ascribed an institutionally sanctioned identity. The assumption in these systems is that students can be known by their individual accomplishments (and, of course, their failures). In a normal curve model, teaching is often constructed as an intervention intended to move “struggling” students closer to a mean.

Activist teacher researchers, by contrast, begin with the assumption that there is much that they don’t know about students. Like theorists who have highlighted the importance of regarding disability as “a social location, complexly embodied” (Siebers, 2008, p. 14) rather than an individual pathology, activist educators take social location—their own and their students’—seriously. The normal curve model is by definition generic rather than local: Students are charted and evaluated from a distance. Reconsidering the normal from the vantage point of the classroom allows for cultivating more egalitarian variations of students’ educational accomplishments, literacies, and capabilities, as well as more nuanced understandings of students’ needs and struggles, without reducing them to categories or lowest common denominators. Disability studies has opened ablest ideologies to critical interrogation by theorizing *from* experience and activating critique at the level of social practice. Similarly, teacher researchers construct counter-understandings of who students are and what they are capable of from the thick of daily classroom experience.

Rather than viewing teaching as an intervention, practitioner research entails educators taking what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) have called an inquiry stance, a means by which classrooms can more systematically become sites of ongoing learning for teachers and students. Unlike other methodologies, teacher research is embedded in daily practice. Teacher researchers' questions emanate from the daily life of the classroom, often arising from moments of dissonance, attempts to address issues of inequity or students' wellbeing (e.g., Pincus, 2001, 2010).

Teacher research often originates in particular classrooms, but it is frequently connected to nested communities of practice, within and across classrooms, schools, neighborhoods, or universities. This aspect has led some to claim practitioner research shares many qualities of social movements (e.g., Campano, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). In literacy education, local and national teacher research networks like the Bread Loaf Teacher Network and the National Writing Project mobilize and connect teacher researchers to broader conversations and initiatives. Teacher research often takes place in communities of inquiry, for example one that Rob participated in over several years with in-service and pre-service literacy teachers in Philadelphia (Simon, 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Zeiders, et al, 2007) that provided a locus for teachers to actualize more critical understandings and teaching identities.

There are many examples of activist teachers and researchers working together to think more expansively about literacy to increase the life chances of historically disenfranchised youth (e.g., Blackburn, 2010; Ghiso, 2011; Jocson, 2008; Jones, 2006; Kinloch, 2012; Kirkland, 2013; Winn, 2011). For example, action oriented university/school collaborations, such as an inquiry community Gerald participated in with elementary teachers from a local urban school district, link university-based practitioner researchers with community-based efforts. This initiative provided a basis for imagining more culturally responsive and engaging literacy curriculum during a period when the testing paradigm predominated (Campano, et al, 2010).

As these examples suggest, activist educators attempt to understand and improve their practices while simultaneously developing new understandings and relationships. For example, in the process of surfacing and addressing difficult and contradictory aspects of practice, teacher researchers often construct more nuanced portraits of students and their potentials, which are not fixed or encompassed by narrow measures. Unlike paradigms of research (and practice) that focus predominantly on outcomes, practitioner researchers, like researchers within some action research or participatory action research traditions (Cammarotta & Fine, 2008; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Morrell, 2007), typically regard their work as both a means to achieving some new outcome or understanding, as well as a productive end in itself (Campano et al, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Simon, 2009).

Teacher Research that Is Not Activist

Not all forms of teacher research are resistant or critical. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) have described how inquiry in increasingly prevalent school- or district-based professional learning communities (PLCs) is often embedded within discourses of accountability and outcomes. PLCs are often directed toward learning from assessment data, predicated on structured cycles or models, which are sometimes employed as a means of helping teachers to increase students'

performance on high stakes exams. Projects like these can serve to reify the normal curve's authority.

For example, in a previous teaching context, Gerald was required to participate with other teachers in his grade level in a professional learning community whose purpose was to analyze school data and investigate student achievement. During one meeting, the agenda included this request:

Please bring the following to the meeting:

Your list identifying the 5 students (within one or two points from the next band) ready to move to the highest [quintile] band

- 1) List the intervention strategies implemented in your room to move these students to the targeted band
- 2) Bring samples of these strategies to share with your grade level

Also, we will address:

Test taking strategies for the state exam

The request to identify particular students and interventions for moving them to higher quintile bands is presented in this memo as both desirable and purely pragmatic. It may be useful, however, to characterize this agenda as a mechanism of what Žižek (2008) has described as “post-political bio-politics,” a form of ideology that disavows its ideological nature by placing emphasis on the practical “management and administration” of human lives (p. 40). Who could argue with increasing student achievement and raising test scores? It is not a conservative issue or a liberal issue (hence post-political). The agenda does not invite heated discussion. It is rather about pragmatically and efficiently addressing a problem—low student achievement—using a hyper-rational approach that appeals to common sense and invokes the authority of strategies that are (implicitly) understood as “scientifically-proven” to work.

In this instance, the PLC is not concerned with the generation of *new* knowledge about and for teaching, learning, or students. Rather, it encourages teachers to help their students more efficiently navigate state exams, and to use test data to slot students into prefabricated categories. Professional development in this case centers entirely on test performance and preparation. Students are objectified, both in terms of their lack of particularity (Carini, 2001) and their lack of agency. In this respect students are regarded, to borrow from Martha Nussbaum's (1995) notion of objectification, as inert—objects to be propelled over the cusp of quintile bands through an outside force—and fungible—interchangeable with other students of similar classification. Students are acted upon, but they are represented as lacking self-determination. Their individual histories remain unmentioned and unaccounted for; similarly absent are counter-narratives about students' needs, capacities, and complex relationships to schooling. The purpose of this type of professional development is to promote “data-driven instruction,” with both data and instruction narrowly construed. Through a medical model, teachers prescribe and implement the appropriate strategies that will ostensibly “intervene” on behalf of students' welfare.

Tests are supposed to inform curriculum and instruction. They are—ideally—one of many representations of teaching and student learning that might include more contextually-sensitive narrative and observational accounts from teachers, parents, caretakers, and students themselves.

In the case of the normal curve, akin to what philosopher Baudrillard (1994) might call the *simulacrum*, the representation supplants reality and structures educational dynamics: test scores synecdochically stand for students themselves; test preparation becomes curriculum; and, the complexity of school culture get distilled to “upticks” or “downticks” (Kozol, 2005) on a school’s annual yearly progress. These “data-driven” PLCs are often about the power of appearances, where concern with test scores overrides concern for individual students’ learning. For instance, it is not uncommon for expulsion rates to increase as high-stakes testing approaches. In the aforementioned example, it is revealing that the only students “targeted” for intervention are those on the cusp of moving into higher quintile bands. What about the rest of the students? In the context of this particular PLC, an aggregated and abstracted representation became more important than the educational growth and histories of individual students’ themselves.

Teacher Research that Resists the Normal Curve

Teacher research is sometimes appropriated to serve instrumental agendas, utilized to shore up rather than countervail institutional apparatus, as in the case of professional development targeted to improve test scores. However, this approach does not represent the more progressive and critical strands of practitioner research, which are often dedicated to the project of humanization. In this section, we examine three examples which illustrate resistance to the normal curve: counter-narratives that demonstrate how a synergy between culturally-engaged literacy curriculum and student legacies can enable young people to alter their educational trajectories; inquiries into redesigning existing school structures in Advanced Placement English and early childhood critical literacy education; and the construction of alternative school communities that redefine stigmatized and criminalized youth identities.

Example 1: Resistance as creating counter-narratives. Many teacher researchers do not buy into the logic of the normal curve. They recognize that students’ existences and potentials cannot be wholly contained by the ascriptive categories used to explain them, and take as a point of departure for their inquiries the insight that labels often fuel social reproduction. “Remedial” students are institutionally constructed through the deficit-based pedagogical policies and practices meant to address their circumstances. This type of practitioner research, often inspired by traditions of critical literacy and culturally-responsive teaching, offers educational counter-narratives that question the normal-curve’s authority. Instead of viewing students as problems to be “fixed” through a diagnostic model, they provide accounts of how students are active agents who—if provided a supportive educational environment—will draw on their own rich experiential and cultural knowledge to critique and navigate inequitable conditions in the process of self-determination.

For example, one of Gerald’s former fifth-grade students, Ma-Lee, was sorted in the lowest quintile band of student performance, according to testing (Campano, 2005). In a literacy curriculum that recognized and built off her familial refugee experience, Ma-Lee was able to employ personal narrative to address intergenerational trauma and create a more empowering academic identity for herself. For Ma-Lee, coming to critical consciousness about her community’s history was an ineluctable part of her educational development. Another of Gerald’s students, Virgil, had been involved in the criminal justice system and labeled a

“juvenile delinquent” (Campano, 2009). In the resistant literary spirit of Richard Wright, ten-year-old Virgil was able to find through writing a cultural release for his (quite rational) oppositional impulses towards authority. He penned a number of powerful essays on political corruption and the vulnerability of young people in society. Both Ma-Lee and Virgil went on to garner academic accolades, as well as make exceptional gains on their standardized tests.

The success of Ma-Lee, Virgil, and so many other students documented and not documented in the teacher research literature undermines the auguries of bureaucratic ascriptions, such as the “struggling reader” and “at risk” student. Their stories expose the tragedy of remedial standardized curricula that homogenizes experience by making sure that “every student is on the same page.” If Ma-Lee and Virgil had to conform to a standardized model that suppresses difference, they may never have been able to distinguish themselves through literacy practices that drew on their singular experiences and to enact their unique forms of culturally-based knowledge and insight. The activist dimension of this work involved challenging school mandates in order to create an alternative space of teaching and learning.

The possible limitation of this form of resistance to the normal curve lies in how it might be read by others. Many teacher researchers provide triumphant narratives of students overcoming obstacles and injustices in order to defy expectations and become exceptional. It is important to keep in mind that these narratives of personal transformation are quintessentially American, part of our shared national mythos. In this way, the story of students like Ma-Lee and Virgil can be read through the lens of iconic figures such as Lincoln, Carnegie, Malcolm X, or Barack Obama. Superseding injustice seems to be the American way. What these stories often leave unexamined is the ideology of individualism, and with it the normal curve. Students who re-position themselves on the curve—even dramatically—leave the curve intact. The more they have struggled to overcome injustices, the more their stories may be read by others as a moral tale: through an exertion of individual will, anything can be changed, whether the vision of change is critical or reactionary. The flipside to this triumphalism is the suspicion that others who are not able to overcome obstacles and injustices may really not be that deserving anyway. They may be perceived to lack virtue, talent, perseverance, or other traits used to stigmatize those most vulnerable in society.

As the above example suggests, there is a difference between overcoming injustices and trying to pull them out at their roots, even though the two often go hand in hand. As we demonstrate in the examples that follow, the most effective forms of resistance are collective in nature, involving the coordinated efforts of many people working in solidarity toward a vision of social justice.

Example 2: Interrogating and redesigning structures for literacy learning. Many activist teacher researchers have taken the constraints of the normal curve as the subject of critical inquiry with students. In the process, they interrogate the structures that level students and work to create alternatives. English educator Joan Cone (2002), for example, was disconcerted by the “caste like” academic placement of students in her California high school (p. 1). Most students in her “low” ability ninth grade class were African American males, even though they did not represent a majority of the school’s population. Cone and her colleagues decided to take action to address this inequity by creating heterogeneous classes and making the 12th grade Advanced Placement class open to any student with the desire to enroll. The mere dismantling of tracking

did not instantly lead to a more egalitarian educational arrangement. Cone's scholarship traces the changes in pedagogy as well as soul-searching into the faculty's perception of students needed to accompany the structural change. Ultimately, she analyzes how both student "failure" and student "achievement" are social constructs, not individual predispositions. One of the most important outgrowths of Cone and her colleagues' activist teacher research was a dramatic rise in the number of African American and Latina/o students who qualified for the University of California and California State entrance requirements.

Critical literacy educator Vivian Vasquez (2004) offers another compelling example of how even young children can challenge the taken-for-granted developmental assumptions of grade levels, where batched children (Anderson-Levitt, 1996) of a specific age are thought to exhibit the same intellectual and social limits and needs. As a teacher researcher in a preschool classroom, Vasquez invited four year-olds to adopt a critical inquiry stance. The students created an audit trail (Harste & Vasquez, 1998) that represented the evolution of their investigations into issues such as gender normativity, advertising, and environmental concerns. In resisting developmental frameworks, Vasquez demonstrated that four year-olds were not "too young" for a critical literacy curriculum and, further, that young students could act collectively to make changes in their lives. Rather than the teacher implementing a top-down curriculum, she followed the students' leads and their emerging sense of justice and fairness. In one powerful example, Vasquez recounts how her students noticed that they were excluded from the French Café, a school language club for the older grades. The students collected data to determine who had been invited and who of those excluded wanted to participate, and then used this information to collectively petition the school for access.

Gerald worked with a student teacher, Angelica, to create pedagogical experiences that valued collaborative intellectual labor through a drama project by *El Teatro Campesino*, political theater of migrant labor camps (Campano, 2007). The students wrote and improvised plays that challenged the ideology of individual authorship and distinction. The plays were often multilingual and addressed issues that were immediately relevant to the students' lives, such as school tracking, racial profiling, and community histories that had been buried in the regular school curriculum. The performance group, *Dancing Across Borders*, garnered recognition in the state of California, and the children even performed at Stanford University, but one would never have been able to predict which students in the group had been pejoratively labeled "struggling reader," "Limited English Proficient," or "gang member." Through drama, the students turned these negative ascriptions around, and their previously stigmatized identities became a source of critical knowledge and insight, or what realist theorists (e.g., Mohanty, 1997; Moya, 2000) have called epistemic privilege. For example, in their play titled "What the Teacher Didn't Know," the students wrote about experiences of being labeled academically and socially, to critique structures that had oppressed them.

These examples occurred in contexts where the normal curve was a dominant ideology, reminding us that even within constraining circumstances there are always opportunities for resistance. On a cautious note, however, we cannot underestimate the ways the normal curve can reassert itself, creating an ever-receding "horizon of expectation." For example, if all the children in the California school mentioned at the beginning of this article were accepted into gifted and talented programs, one can imagine that those with more resources would find new ways to

distinguish themselves. In fact, that is exactly what happened in the midwestern district, where a new category of gifted and talented, the “highly/profoundly gifted,” was created, which appropriated the ostensibly egalitarian notion of multiple intelligences to create new classifications of supposed individual aptitude. This example raises the possibility that if all students had access to an AP English classroom, maybe a higher placement would be created to accommodate those with more power and privilege. Similarly, if children gain access to the French Café, maybe a “Latin Bistro” will crop up exclusively for the upper grades. The structures may not be this obvious. In fact, recalling Žižek (1989), the more imperceptible they are, the more insidious. This is the case with intellectual work that is deemed “extracurricular” or “enrichment,” such as the performance troop *Dancing Across Borders*, which gets relegated to the margins of the school day and is not considered a central part of the literacy curriculum.

Example 3: Resistance as (re)imagining alternative school communities. Much activist teacher research takes place within (and often against) mainstream institutions informed by dominant ideologies. This work frequently is driven by individual teachers’ willingness to call common practices or understandings into question, often in collaboration with colleagues and students. Joan Cone’s (2005) investigation into the co-construction of low achievement began by wondering what coded messages are hidden within publicized lists:

What messages are hidden in class rosters and the lists posted on school and classroom bulletin boards, published in school and local newspapers, tacked on the teachers’ workroom door? What, for example, do lists of honor roll students, suspended students, students excused for forensics tournaments, seniors repeating algebra, ninth graders in physical science, ninth graders in honors biology reveal about the school? (p. 52)

Our final example suggests how activist educators can work to revise the fundamental grammar of schooling (Tyack & Cuban, 1998) by questioning these tendencies to group students hierarchically by presumed abilities. As the following example illustrates, activist teacher researchers have created alternative school environments oriented toward more equitable understandings of ability, achievement, potentials, and life chances of disenfranchised youth.

As a literacy teacher, Rob helped create Life Learning Academy (LLA), a 60-student alternative high school for adolescents who were involved in or deemed “at risk” of involvement in the criminal justice system (e.g., Simon, 2005; Simon, Campano, Broderick, & Pantoja, 2012). Life Learning Academy began as a part of a coordinated inquiry into the San Francisco juvenile justice system and relevant support services led by the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice and Delancey Street Foundation—a resident-run, self-help rehabilitation facility for former convicts and drug addicts—involving over 400 community-based organizations. The school was designed to address the needs of urban adolescents who had experienced prolonged school failure.

The Life Learning Academy curriculum is project-based. The first project was the construction of the school itself, built from the ground up on a reconstituted military base on Treasure Island by Delancey Street residents and LLA students and staff. It remains a work in progress: Subsequent groups of LLA students redesign, redecorate, repaint, and build additions to the school, such as an organic community garden, a digital storytelling studio, or a student-run café, the operation of which was integrated with the math and literacy curriculum. The process of

constructing the building was a literal manifestation of the school ethos, intended to bond disparate individuals—most of whom had never viewed school as a place where they felt supported, understood, or even welcome—into a community. From Delancey Street, LLA appropriated the idea of school as an extended family, where individuals felt connected to a collaborative endeavor. Teachers regard Life Learning students as academics, intellectuals, and activists, rather than as failures. This orientation is supported by integrated, project-based curricula that work across vocational and core subject areas, constructing achievement as multidimensional and relational, linking the success of any one member of the community to the success of all.

The school did not emerge fully formed. Rather, it required ongoing tinkering, a quality suggested by the school motto: “The important thing is this: to be able, at any moment, to sacrifice what we are for what we could become.” Life Learning Academy evolved from (and continues to involve) ongoing inquiry, revision, and daily work. Like Joan Cone, Life Learning teachers were concerned about legacies of school tracking present in their own rosters and organizing principles, as well as those imposed upon them by the state university system and the local school district. Rob and other teachers arranged—and rearranged—classes heterogeneously, intentionally grouping students across ages, abilities, and interests, and created opportunities for students to assume leadership, mentoring, counseling, and even administrative and teaching roles within the school. These arrangements presented new possibilities for students like Monica, a 14-year old Latina who had been deemed such a significant threat by her middle school administration that they not only expelled her in eighth grade, but banned her from campus, refusing to allow her to attend her peers’ graduation. After eight months at LLA, Monica gained three grade-levels in reading fluency, reading comprehension, and math (LaFrance, 2004). She also did not miss a single day of school in ninth grade. Monica came to view the school as a place where she felt known, where she could move beyond the institutional ascription of “drop-out.”

Third-party assessment has demonstrated Life Learning Academy’s accomplishments by multiple measures (LaFrance, 2004) —including significantly lower rates of criminal recidivism, absences, and dropouts, and increased grade-point averages, graduation rates, and students passing statewide exit exams. At the same time, the school’s attempts to realign and challenge normative understandings continually create new challenges, questions, and dilemmas, including in some cases new hierarchies that reinscribe differences and divisions. While collectively drawing upon stigmatized or negative social experiences, categories, and labels to construct an alternative community identity in school, many LLA students struggle to work against negative influences outside the school. At the same time, assumptions about normality and aptitude often reassert themselves, for example in matching up LLA students’ “performances” to state expectations, or needing to align an intentionally different course of study to district requirements for scope and sequence of courses. Further, while working to undermine such categories as “at risk,” mainstream norms can resurface, as in the premium placed on becoming “productive citizens,” where citizenship can have a valence of compliance rather than critical engagement and dissent.

As Life Learning Academy demonstrates, school-based inquiry necessitates a collective response and is often inter-organizational and connected to broader reform. Elsewhere, small school

projects like New York's Harvey Milk High School, designed to support the learning of "at-risk" gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning adolescents, present other examples of how school-based practitioner research can support counter-practices that present opportunities for students and teachers to learn together about what counts as school—and to construct more nurturing, ethical, and egalitarian alternatives.

Conclusion

In this article, we may have presented the ideology of the normal curve as an ostensibly Gordian knot of structures, policies, and pedagogies which can feel almost deterministic. This sentiment has merit, because we live in a classification society fueled by deep political and economic interests. Education has been rightly critiqued as an instrument of social reproduction. However, because the normal curve is a social practice, not an aspect of nature or merely notional, literacy educators can take direct action on its deleterious effects on students through counter-practices. As our examples suggest, such resistance is an ongoing process: a working ideal rather than a state of arrival, an aspect of a critical inquiry stance. This process invariably takes place in the messiness of the everyday. It involves contradiction and often our best judgments in the moment. It is this complexity that the ideology of the normal curve tries to repress, by abstracting one aspect or one moment as somehow representative of a student's potential across contexts and prescribing interventions accordingly.

One of the contributions of disability studies is that it reminds social constructivists to be more material, what Michael Bérubé (2002) characterizes as closer attention to the "oscillations between social constructionism and critical realism" (p. 343). Constructivism is not merely a metaphor for how discourse operates, but also an ideology that inheres in material reality. As the examples we have explored illustrate, activist teacher researchers are uniquely positioned to attend to these realities, as they analyze structures such as classroom space, school segregation, labeling, tracking, and testing. In the process, they also create new opportunities for students to thrive.

These material conditions, like all classroom interactions, are constituted through language, texts and discourse, and can therefore be read, analyzed, contested, and opened to multiple possible interpretations, what Lytle (1995) has theorized as "the literacies of teaching" (p. 4). As the examples we have documented suggest, for teacher researchers, activist literacies involve actualizing change in and through the "text" of the classroom, challenging the very ideologies of literacy curriculum and pedagogy (Simon, et al, 2012). Activist literacy educators like Cone (2002), who contested the practice of tracking, or Vasquez (2004), who critiqued the logic of leveling, work against but also within the systems they attempt to reform. In this respect, teacher research is a form of activist labor, a means of sustaining in the critical, daily work of the classroom, questioning inequitable policies, resisting the ideologies that undergird them, and developing counter-practices.

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