What Teachers Bring: The Intellectual Resources of Adolescent Literacy Educators in an Era of Standardization

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ABSTRACT: Within a political context focused on learning outcomes measured by standardized tests and driven by market-based reforms, teachers are increasingly viewed as recipients of professional development focusing on what has been deemed "best practices" by those outside of their teaching context. This article uses concepts from critical literacy and feminist epistemologies to analyze data from a year-long teacher inquiry community focused on adolescent literacy education. It demonstrates how teachers mobilized four knowledge sources, or resources, to understand and improve their practice: *Autobiographical reflexivity, outside readings, interactions with students,* and *visions of the possible.* It makes the argument that learning spaces for teachers should be constructed to leverage, rather than ignore, what teachers bring to their learning through self-directed study, years of teaching, and a lifetime of experiences. Implications for facilitators, school leaders, teacher educators, and teachers include using the concept of teacher resources in professional development, creating more spaces for teachers to engage in authentic inquiry, and exposing pre-service teachers to images of intellectually-engaged teacher communities.

Keywords: adolescent literacy, professional development, teacher inquiry, teacher education

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I'd never *realized* that my own inquiry is powerful and can help me teach. *That* meeting...the *resources* that were in that room. I'm not talking about what we were holding in our hands, but what we brought as teachers, in our minds, our experience.

– Lucy

Lucy (all names are pseudonyms) was part of the Adolescent Literacy Education Study Group, a collaborative research project in which I, a university-based researcher, brought together five teachers in a large urban area to inquire into their practice. The group met twice monthly over the course of a year to discuss challenges of teaching, pose questions about practice, and engage in collaborative self-directed learning. Lucy's quotation refers to an early meeting in which the teachers were invited to bring an "artifact of practice" that served as a thinking partner. The artifact experience was one example of my attempt to facilitate a space that leveraged, rather than ignored, the questions, experiences, and insights that the teachers brought to their teaching practice. Lucy's comment highlights the value of an experience that drew upon the knowledge that she and her colleagues brought to the learning space. Her surprise at the power of her own inquiry is also noteworthy. In her nine years of teaching, Lucy shared that she had never experienced professional development that fully acknowledged all that she brought to her learning.

As a university-based researcher, teacher educator, and former K-12 teacher, I formed the study group out of a sense of concern about the positioning of teachers in much of professional development and a curiosity about how professional development might reposition teachers as knowledge generators, rather than knowledge recipients. As the teachers and I worked together, we came to a collective awareness of the central questions in the teachers' work; saw problems in new ways; and took action in the form of a changed practice along with the sharing of our work to outside audiences.

I formed the group in the context of recent reform efforts that have resulted in increased standardization and monitoring of the teaching profession (Nieto, 2003; Ravitch, 2013; Sleeter, 2008;

Zeichner, 2010). In this political climate, teachers' work has been increasingly regulated (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Ingersoll, 2003), with initiatives such as merit pay and scripted curricula, leaving them with little instructional autonomy (Kumashiro, 2012; Ravitch, 2010). While tight regulations of the teaching profession are hardly new (Goldstein, 2014; Tyack, 1974), the No Child Left Behind Act and the adoption of the Common Core State Standards have led to an increase in testing, a narrowing of curriculum, and a focus on college and workforce preparedness to the exclusion of other aims of education (e.g. Au, 2009; Sleeter, 2008). These trends fall under the rubric of neoliberalism, which Harvey (2005) defines as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). These reforms have led to shifts in teacher education and professional development from valuing students' communities and lives toward a more narrow focus on increasing test scores and preparing students for the workforce (Au, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Lipman, 2011).

This new wave of reform also impacts teacher education and professional development. While research, policy, and practice in the 1990s reflected a trend toward collaborative learning for teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hawley & Valli, 1999), many of these efforts have been co-opted by the standards movement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). For example, in response to the Common Core State Standards, many schools are adopting new curricular materials and relying out outside experts to come in and deliver "best practices" to teachers. This model of professional development renders invisible the intellectual resources that teachers bring to their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Lieberman & Wood, 2002).

At the same time, there is growing concern about teachers remaining in the teaching force (e.g. Ingersoll, 2003; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Johnson, 2007), with scholars pointing toward meaningful

professional development as one opportunity to nurture and support intellectually engaged teachers (e.g. Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Nieto, 2009). Nieto (2009) writes:

> If we are to keep good teachers in the classroom, school administrators and policymakers, among others, need to find ways to create environments in which teachers can form strong collaborative relationships with their peers and in which they can continue to learn about themselves, their students, and their students' communities. Until these things happen, survival will be the most we can hope for. And survival is simply not good enough – for teachers, for their students, or for the United States (p. 13).

Recent work on inquiry communities with transformative (Saavedra, 1996), inquiry-based (Blackburn et al., 2010; Meyer, 1998; Nieto, 2003), and emancipatory (Luna et al., 2004; Souto-Manning, 2011) underpinnings, expand on Nieto's vision by providing powerful counter-examples to current political trends; positioning teachers as generators, rather than recipients, of knowledge. Nieto (2003), for example, draws on her work with an inquiry group of urban teachers to offer a vision of teaching that includes love, autobiography, anger, hope, intellectual work, and democratic practice. Souto-Manning (2010) works within the Freirian tradition of problem-posing education (1970) to create culture circles in which teachers consider their own literacies in relation to their students.' In her work in an inquiry community of teachers committed to combatting homophobia, Blackburn et al. (2010) highlighted the importance of teachers supporting each other in responding to homophobia in ways that accounted for their unique autobiographies and contexts, as well as the group's collective vision for how schools should be. Luna et al. (2004) documented the work of a teacher inquiry group that focused on critical literacy, emphasizing the importance of a space for "personal and sociopolitical analyses to exist side by side" (p. 77). Together, these studies offer images of professional development that emphasize relationships among teachers, students, and communities and value the experiences, insights, and questions that teachers bring to the table.

This article builds on this body of work by offering an in-depth analysis of a teacher learning community that fostered collaborative relationships and foregrounded teachers' knowledge. Specifically, it adds to existing empirical research by explicitly analyzing the resources that the teachers brought to their professional development. Drawing on data from the Adolescent Literacy Education Study Group, I engage the question: *Within the context of the study group, what resources did teachers use to understand and change their practice?*

This analysis shows how the teachers mined multiple knowledge sources – or resources – to understand their work and how these resources intermingled with each other to open up new ways of looking at students, schools, and teaching. I make the argument that teacher education and professional development that use, rather than ignore, these valuable tools for sense-making will expand teachers' capacity to understand their students and design learning experiences that are responsive to their lives. By developing a heightened sense of what teachers bring – through self-directed study, years of teaching, and a lifetime of experiences – we increase our ability to understand the complex ways that they approach their work and consider how spaces might be designed to better support their professional growth.

In the sections that follow, I provide a brief history and description of the Adolescent Literacy Education

> **I formed the study group out of a sense of concern about the positioning of teachers in much of professional development and a curiosity about how professional development might reposition teachers as knowledge generators, rather than knowledge recipients.**

Study Group, explain how theories of critical literacy and feminist epistemologies shape my analysis of the group, and describe the methods of data generation and analysis. Then, I draw on data from the group's conversations to show how the teachers in the group drew on *autobiographical reflexivity, outside readings, interactions with students,* and *visions of the possible* to inform their practice. I conclude with implications for facilitators of teacher learning, teacher educators, and school leaders.

The Adolescent Literacy Education Study Group

In February and March of 2011, I contacted English/Language Arts teachers from a large urban area through email lists of the local site of the National Writing Project and the graduate school of education in which I taught. In my initial email, I identified myself as "a strong believer in the power of collaborative, intellectual learning spaces for teachers to think about their work" and noted that "we might grapple with issues about language and identity, critical literacy, linguistic and cultural diversity, or building literacy-rich environments in the face of constraints." The teachers who were attracted to the group were aligned with the vision of taking an inquiry stance towards practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Table 1 in Appendix A offers a window into the five teacher-participants in terms of their school, race, background, and students' race.

The teachers came from a range of experience levels and school contexts. All of the members of the group, including myself, were White and all of the teachers taught primarily students of color, which became explicitly significant at various points during the group's work. The teachers' reasons for joining the group included wanting to engage in the kind of inquiry community that they had experienced in college or graduate school (Joel, Becca), wanting to talk about the "real" challenges of practice and not just learn about strategies (Mary), seeking professional community (Melissa, Lucy), and feeling disconnected from beliefs about teaching for social justice in the context of a tightly controlled school environment (Becca). While the teachers had different reasons for joining the group, they expressed their shared commitment to supporting and challenging each other, reflecting on their

theories-of-practice, considering how to align their practices with their visions, and holding themselves and each other accountable for their goals, learning, and actions.

I was a former public school teacher who brought five years of K-12 teaching experience in both urban and suburban schools. Like the teachers, I was a White teacher who had taught primarily students of color in both contexts. I foregrounded my teaching experience early on, recounting some of the struggles and questions I had during my own teaching career and describing how my positive and negative experiences with professional development inspired me to create the study group. Bringing my experiences to the group, sharing my struggles, and empathizing with the teachers' situations supported my efforts to position myself as a co-thinker and co-researcher *with* the teachers. As facilitator, I created structures for the teachers to talk, write, share, and respond, and also sought feedback from them throughout our work together.

We spent the first nine meetings discussing texts selected by group members, including articles, book chapters, and the teachers' writing. During this time, the group built a sense of trust and identified common areas of inquiry (e.g. teacher identity, student writing, relationships, White privilege, language and power, classroom talk, classroom community). During the second phase of the group's work, each teacher conceptualized an inquiry, which included developing questions, regular reflective writing on a shared group document, and collaborative oral inquiry into artifacts of practice (e.g. recording of a discussion, student work samples, problem of practice) using Descriptive Review processes (Carini, 2002). The group's culminating conference presentation featured a threaded dramatic narrative capturing "the life" of each teacher's inquiry, which included compelling stories from the classroom that offered windows into the ways that the teachers grappled with questions of practice at various points in their inquiries.

Theoretical Frameworks

I draw on two theoretical frameworks to illuminate the resources that the teachers brought to their

discussions of their work with adolescents. Critical literacy makes visible the complex ways that adolescents engage with texts and opens up a broader sense of what kinds of knowledge bases must be employed when engaging in literacy practices with young people. In addition, my analysis also focuses on the ways that the teachers' own critical readings of their contexts shaped their choices. Feminist epistemologies illuminate ways in which the context and structure of the group itself brought forth rich and varied personal and professional resources that would have been invisible in more top-down forms of professional development.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy requires a broadening of the definition of literacy from a set of skills or school knowledge, to a social and cultural construct (Willis, 1997). From a critical literacy perspective, "reading the world precedes reading the word" (Freire, 1987, p. 35). For example, Luke and Freebody (1997) describe the relationship between textual interpretations and social location: "One never just (generically) reads. Readers always read something, a textual representation, and readers always take up an epistemological standpoint, stance, and relationship to the values and ideologies, discourses, and worldviews in the text" (p. 195). This quotation highlights the non-neutrality of both texts and readers, emphasizing the sociopolitical context in which reading and writing take place.

The study group teachers' definitions of literacy focused less on students' reading and writing skills and more on how they could use reading and writing to navigate the world, see things from multiple perspectives, and take action based on their ongoing sense-making. They defined literacy using descriptions like "communication," "the way you interact with the world," "interpreting and responding to some context that you're in," "having more awareness of the techniques that media is using," and "how students identify themselves and how they understand the world around them." These assumptions about literacy require understandings of adolescents' lives, sociocultural and political contexts, and the communities in which they lived.

Within the broader framework of critical literacy, the *literacies of teaching* (Lytle, 2006) informed my analysis of the ways that the teachers made sense of their practice. Lytle (2006) describes the literacies of teaching as a "critical framework through which classrooms, schools, districts, and communities are viewed as texts with multiple possible interpretations and the potential to become generative sites of inquiry" (p. 258). This framework illuminates how the resources that the teachers brought to their practice were used to read and write the life-texts of their classrooms, inform their beliefs about practice, and influence subsequent actions.

Feminist Epistemologies

As the facilitator of the study group, I aimed to create a space that enabled teachers to use multiple perspectives in order to question their assumptions, draw on feelings as a source of knowledge, act with an awareness of power differences, and analyze practice in ways that accounted differences related to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other forms of difference. These approaches were informed by feminist ways of knowing. Rather than assuming a single universal truth, feminist epistemologies assume that understandings are situated and one's experience of the world is predicated on social location (e.g. Evans, 1979; Richardson, 1997; Weiler, 1991). In addition to accounting for multiple and partial understandings, feminist practices legitimize the epistemological value of feelings. For example, Lorde (1984) writes: "I don't see feel/think as a dichotomy. I see them as a choice of ways and combinations" (pp. 100-1). This perspective has led to the legitimization of affective ways of knowing within teaching and research contexts, such as poetry (Richardson, 1997), narrative (Hesford, 1999), and art (Ellsworth, 2005). Black feminist perspectives focus on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1991) to understand the multiple and overlapping identity categories that shape experiences of the world, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and nationality.

Feminist teachers in university settings recognize how teaching and learning are situated within institutions and systems of power (e.g. Britzman,

1999; Kamler, 2001). Britzman (1999), for example, writes about the role of "institutional biography," which allows teachers to gain a critical distance from their own assumptions and avoid unconsciously reproducing educational practices. In the study group, the teachers didn't just accept their own experiences uncritically, but rather used the space of the study group to approach their autobiographies *reflexively,* allowing them to gain new perspectives on their practice and see the assumptions that they had previously taken for granted. In the context of field research, England (1994) writes, "reflexivity is self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher. Indeed reflexivity is critical to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions" (p. 82). Teaching, like research, involves ongoing sense-making as one reads classrooms, schools, and students in order to interpret and act. Therefore, a reflexive stance enables teachers be more open-minded and responsive to students and situations.

Taken together, the frameworks of critical literacy and feminist epistemologies offer opportunities to analyze how teachers' experiences, questions, and knowledges influenced their readings of their worlds and teaching practice. In the next section, I describe my data collection and analysis methods before discussing the resources that the teachers brought.

Methods of Data Generation and Analysis

I locate this project within the methodologies of participatory action research (McIntyre, 2008) and practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The study group was a participatory action research project in that a group of us came together to better understand issues and take action based on our collective sense-making. At the same time, I considered my facilitation and leadership of the study group as a practice and so I also considered myself to be a practitioner researcher within the group.

Data sources included transcripts of the group meetings, two semi-structured interviews with each teacher, artifacts, field notes, and my research journal. These multiple sources allowed me to see how themes and patterns emerged across the data. I inductively coded the data ethnographically using ongoing and recursive analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I viewed writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000), and wrote extensively in the form of field notes, analytic memos, and practitioner researcher reflections.

In early rounds of analysis, I began to see the various ways that the teachers drew on various knowledge sources to make sense of their practice. After an initial round of inductive analysis, I identified twelve categories of resources, which included nine that represented knowledge that the teachers brought and three that described the way that the group itself was a resource for the teachers. Because I wanted to understand the types of knowledge sources that teachers bring to their learning and practice, I narrowed my analysis to exclude the ways the group itself functioned as a resource. I then continued refining the categories through subsequent rounds of recursive analysis, collapsing some (e.g. "cultural resources and family legacies" and "autobiographical and experiential resources") and eliminating ones that were not as prevalent throughout the data as a whole (e.g. "material and community resources").

After this round of analysis, I saw three categories of resources that teachers used to make sense of their practice – personal histories, experiences with students, and outside texts. I then broke the transcripts down into episodes of talk and asked, "How are the teachers mobilizing these resources to make sense of their practice?" As I looked at the ways that the teachers drew upon the resources within their conversations, I refined each category description to be more specific (e.g. personal histories became autobiographical reflexivity). As part of my larger research project, I had coded the emergent theme of "images of the possible" and I began to see the ways that expressions of hope and desire functioned as a resource in terms of generating a sense of urgency and purpose for the work. Throughout the process, I met regularly with several peer debriefers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), had two collaborative analysis sessions with the group, and received feedback from the teachers about my

ongoing interpretations through the context of our conversations.

Teacher Resources for Literacy Education

In what follows, I discuss each of the four resources that emerged from the data –*autobiographical reflexivity, outside readings, interactions with students,* and *visions of the possible* – in terms of how each enabled the teachers to question their assumptions, see issues from new points of view, and make decisions about future actions.

Autobiographical Reflexivity

In the study group discussions, the teachers frequently drew upon their own autobiographies to make sense of practice. However, rather than view their autobiographies as fixed and deterministic, the teachers tended to actively reflect on how their past and current experiences influenced the way they approached their work. Stories of their experiences with schooling came up in many conversations. These stories were formalized during the seventh meeting, when Joel suggested that each teacher share a *Where My Teaching is From* poem, inspired by George Ella Lyon's (1999) poem, *Where I'm From*. These poems allowed the teachers to reflect on the roots of their beliefs about teaching and the subsequent discussions opened up new ways of thinking about their practice. This excerpt from Mary's poem, and the discussion that followed, offers a window into how the teachers' used their autobiographies to see their students and teaching practice differently.

Where I'm From (Education Version)

By Mary

> I am from my silent tears when the returned assignment read 89
> And not 90
> From my own cries of "Can someone please check this?" and "Are you SURE I did it right?"
> I am from my obsessive perfectionism
> As my ability to do well in school became the defining factor of my identity...

> I am from hating the assignments that teachers thought we all would love
> We have to work in groups? You want me to read something <u>out loud</u>?
> "I need to bring this to the office." "Yes, I think I am sick."
> I am from the terror that these assignments caused me
> And the subsequent lack of focus on what we were supposed to learn from the assignment...

> I am from adoring my teachers,
> Their passion and energy for learning
> And their care and concern for me.
> I am from completely trusting the adults in my school
> To provide me with what I needed academically and personally...

> I am from wishing I could go to school forever.

Mary's poem opened space for the group to see the high school classroom from the perspective of a student for whom school success was extremely important, close relationships with teachers were a central part of her experience, and social aspects of learning (such as group work and reading aloud) caused anxiety. For Becca, whose school experience was different from Mary's, the poem offered another perspective on her own practice. Hearing Mary's poem prompted her to reflect on how her students may experience her classroom and question her assumptions about relationships between students and teachers. After Mary shared her poem and explained how, even in college, she developed important supportive relationships with professors and staff, Becca responded:

> I've never been able to feel that with people I consider professors or staff because I don't feel comfortable. I really admire that, to feel like I'm comfortable sharing my bad day with you because I'm not worried about your judgment. I'm sure that affects the way that I am with kids in ways that I don't realize. Like I don't know if *I'm* more standoffish than I

meant to be because I-, always *felt*, I don't know.

Hearing Mary's poem provided space for Becca to re-read her own classroom and wonder aloud about how her practice was shaped by her unique personal experiences. She went on to reflect on all of the students in her class who may not have felt comfortable for a wide variety of reasons and consider idea that she may never really know how they felt in her class.

In addition to opening up new questions for others, sharing her poem offered Mary the critical distance necessary to come to a new realization about her own identity as a student and teacher. After reading her poem out loud, she said:

> When I was writing this, *my ability to do well in school became the defining factor of my identity* (pause). Sometimes feel like all I *have* is *teaching* and *school*. I feel like it completely takes over my identity and so when I'm with other teachers and they're like, "Oh let's talk about something else other than school," I'm sort of like I don't *have* anything else other than school, like what else do you want me to talk about?. . . So the connection between those two, when I was *in* school that sort of taking over how I saw myself and, I don't know whether how I see myself *now* is related to that.

This realization was the beginning of what became Mary's ongoing inquiry into her identity as a teacher. At various points during the study group's work, she discussed dilemmas related to how she was perceived by her colleagues, administrators, and students. She sometimes reported feeling stuck between the identity of a social justice educator and that of a more traditional teacher. At other times, she grappled with the ways in which her desire to be a "good teacher" impacted the choices that she made. She noted that the moment when she read her poem aloud was when she realized how important others' perceptions were to her, especially when related to school success.

Mary's poem, and the discussion that followed, is one example of the way that critical autobiographical reflection acted as a resource for the teachers. Throughout the course of the study group's work, it was common for the teachers to draw on their experiences to raise questions about practice. For example, Lucy, who had grown up in a rural farming community, remembered the pain she experienced in college when she began to feel a tension between assimilating to Standard English conventions and proudly speaking in her home dialect. Joel frequently discussed how his upper middle class upbringing just fifteen minutes away from the low-income urban school in which he taught shaped his relationships with students. At one meeting, Becca came to realize how her family's political debates at the dinner table influenced her assumptions about what makes a "good discussion" in her classroom. At another meeting, the group focused on experiences travelling abroad, drawing on their feelings of being linguistic and cultural outsiders to think through issues of language, culture, and power.

From the beginning, the study group teachers talked about the ways that teaching was relational work. During the third meeting, prompted by a discussion of the book *Understanding Youth* (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006), the teachers came to consensus about the importance of relationships in teaching. Mary said, "everything about *teaching* is about interactions and relationships" and Lucy reflected at the end of the meeting by saying "I'm just feeling the

Each of the resources described in this article – autobiographical reflexivity, outside readings, interactions with students, and visions of the possible – already existed within the teachers. The space created by the study group enabled the resources to be animated and leveraged for learning, growth, and action.

pull again that I *do* prioritize relationships." If relationships are central to teaching, then it follows that a central element in teaching is who one is. Whether it is drawing on experiences being isolated in order empathize with students experiencing isolation, wondering how a privileged upbringing impacts relationships with students, or realizing that interactional patterns within our own families shape our assumptions about communication, the teachers critically reflected on how their pasts shaped their understandings and drew upon each other's autobiographies to see classrooms, students, and practice in new ways.

Outside Readings

While traditional conceptions of teacher knowledge assume that it is comprised of pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, or a synthesis of the two (e.g. Shulman, 1986), the teachers in the group evoked an even wider range of knowledge from outside reading that represented a variety of lenses for looking at classrooms, students, and schools. Throughout the conversations, the teachers drew on a rich repertoire of collective reading experiences that they gained from their own academic or personal reading in areas as varied as political science, anthropology, linguistics, psychology, adolescent development, critical social theory, history, feminist studies, multicultural education, news, stories, and popular media. They employed these readings in a range of ways to engage with questions about how students understood themselves within their worlds and how their teaching fit within webs of power relationships.

At one meeting, Mary shared that she wanted to use a book *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (Graff & Birkenstein, 2007) in order to support her students in critically reflecting on their agency around the use of "I" in academic writing. Mary described how she was excited to use this book, but her department chair said that she couldn't use it because it did not explicitly prohibit the use of the first person in academic writing. The conversation then coalesced around what the teachers called the "No I Rule." The following exchange demonstrates the range of outside readings that the teachers employed to analyze a problem of practice:

> Becca: I'm trying to think of a famous essayist right now. Someone who writes an editorial for the *New York Times* or whatever, if *they* were to say "I will argue that," you wouldn't think *anything* of it. But when an *un*sophisticated or *less* sophisticated or not *famous* writer uses it?

> Melissa: But then maybe the "I" holds more weight, because we know that that "I" is this really *strong* researcher? So, bringing himself or herself into that piece *makes* it more credible? Whereas for most people? You don't have that background or that persona or that prestige to be able to make *your* argument sound like a better argument just because it's yours.

> Kathleen: I would say the majority of the research I've read has "I" in it or "we." So what *this* conversation is making me realize is that the argument's *not* that "in academic writing in college, no one uses 'I.'" Because if *that's* the argument, I don't think that's *true*.

> Melissa: A lot of the reading I've done at [the university] has been, "You *have* to explain your methodology" and that's not what students in high school or middle school tend to have to *do*.

Within the context of neoliberal school reform, which privileges profit, efficiency, and competition, and threatens to supplant ideals such as democracy and empathy, it becomes increasingly urgent to create and protect spaces where teachers are able to engage in humanizing learning practices such as the ones described here.

Becca: I know that my students are *taught* that if you are doing the most *basic* paper about a book, where you're just analyzing the theme of the novel, you shouldn't use "I." I'm not sure that I agree with that, but that *is* the commonly held belief.

Lucy: Is there research that talks more about when this "I rule" came about?

This discussion excerpt highlights the ways that teachers drew on a rich repertoire of learning in multiple contexts, genres, and disciplines (e.g. news media, popular culture, pedagogical texts, history, academic research) to inform their analysis of their work, and consider how they might respond. Becca and Melissa drew on their knowledge of newspaper columns to analyze how columnists incorporate "I." Melissa and I then analyzed how we had seen researchers use "I" in academic research. Then, Lucy expressed a desire to take a historical perspective on this issue, wondering aloud how the idea of using "I" in writing has changed over time. The conversation about the "No I Rule" highlights how the teachers' discussions included a range of outside perspectives to understand the history, politics, and implications of various educational practices and events at their schools.

Throughout the conversations, the teachers consistently drew on these outside readings to inform their thinking on a range of issues. When the teachers were invited to bring in an artifact that was a thinking partner for them, Mary brought in a newspaper article about school safety, which led to a discussion about the negative messages that students implicitly receive when schools are set up to resemble prisons. Lucy brought two images of Black men from popular culture that one of her students had shared with her, which reminded her of the ways that the outside world viewed many of her students and the importance of making space within her classroom to engage in critical media analysis. Other artifacts were a work of literature and a book on education theory.

Frequently, the teachers employed concepts from their own reading in order to explain or make sense of phenomena from their classrooms. For example, Lucy and Joel came to the group with questions about language politics and a desire to understand how students navigated multiple discourse communities. Lucy drew on her reading of Lisa Delpit, Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye, and others to shape her theory of language education. Joel drew upon concepts from critical pedagogues, such as Paulo Freire and Linda Christensen, to inform his theory of practice and conceptualize himself as a "critical social educator." Through ongoing dialogue that spanned almost the entire duration of the group's work together, Lucy and Joel drew upon knowledge from various theoretical and pedagogical texts, as well as Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel's (1993) short story, *Who Said We All Have to Talk Alike,* to consider how language arts instruction could create space for their students to expand their repertoire of discourses, read the world critically, and act with agency in a range of discourse communities.

Interactions with Students

The teachers came to the study group with years of collective experience interacting with students, and they brought this knowledge to the study group as a resource for understanding their practice. In this section, I show how the teachers drew on stories of interactions with students to question their assumptions and see new possibilities. Since all of the group members were White and taught mostly students of color, students' perspectives and experiences were especially valuable for the teachers to become aware of their blind spots related to race and culture. The teachers also spent time grappling with their privilege as White people teaching students of color and the difficulty, yet importance, of trying to understand situations from their students' perspectives.

Teachers' stories prompted contact zones, which Pratt (1991) defines as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 33). While some stories that group members shared were not about race, many of them were, and I found the stories about race to be a productive site of individual and collective sense-making. For example, in one of the group's early meetings, Becca

shared how a student named Amber helped her to question her language choices. She shared:

> It was Black History Month and my school was having a door decorating contest. Every homeroom drew a topic and you had to decorate your door according to the topic. Ours was Black educators. For a week, in homeroom, I probably said the words, "Black History Month" and "Black educator" fifty-five thousand times. And I could see that Amber Willis was just not happy. Finally one day I was like "Amber, your face is reading 'I am miserable.' What's going on?" And she said in front of twenty-seven kids, "I don't want to tell you because I think it's going to hurt your feelings." And I was like, "Mm. I think I can handle it." She was like, "I don't think you should ever say the word Black. I don't think that you should say Black anything. I don't like it. You can't say it. I can say it, but you can't say it." And it was one of those moments where it was like "Do we talk about this right now? We have twenty minutes left. Do we talk about this right now?"

After Becca told this story, the study group members asked several questions to unpack the incident – about Becca's relationship with Amber, the choices she made in that critical moment, what happened next, and how she would change her response if she could go back. Becca explained how she responded with something that she realized in retrospect was "just dropping some college knowledge" and "blah blah blah," but she and Amber talked for a long time after school. During that conversation, Becca came to a deeper understanding of Amber's reasons for not wanting her to use the word Black to describe African Americans. The telling of this story and the collaborative unpacking of the incident opened new questions for members of the group – about teachers' relationships with individual students, race politics, language, and the teacher's role in modeling learning, vulnerability, and uncertainty.

Throughout the study group conversations, the teachers used these kinds of critical incidents with individual students as a source of learning and knowledge. For example, at another meeting, Lucy shared a moment in which a female student in her class had a strong reaction to a vernacular term used by one of the male students, which opened up space for Lucy to learn from her students about the history and usages of this widely-used term. When recounted in the study group, the moment provided a starting point for the teachers to discuss the complexity of intersections of race, class, and gender in the classroom and society. As with Becca's story, Lucy's story allowed the teachers to analyze a contentious moment in the classroom and consider options for responding in the future. These stories of interactions with individual students, retold in the study group, were a way to "slow teaching down" (Ballenger, 2009). They opened up new understandings of students' readings of the world (Freire, 1987) and helped the group members question their assumptions about language, literacy, teaching, and learning.

It is worth noting that the telling of and responding to these kinds of stories in which the teachers grappled with their assumptions, came to terms with their blind spots, or exposed their missteps, took a high degree of trust. The study group became the kind of trusting space where these stories were possible, which led to sharing, progress, and learning. As a facilitator, creating this kind of space took intention, effort, and critical reflection. Early on, I tried to support the teachers when they expressed vulnerability or uncertainty, and also validated race as a worthy topic of discussion when it came up. Throughout this process, I grappled with how to maintain that sense of trust while also encouraging a space where the teachers and I pushed each other in ways that were productive, yet sometimes uncomfortable. Creating the context in which difficult stories could surface enabled the teachers to learn from these interactions with students in the classroom.

Visions of the Possible

Many scholars (e.g. Giroux, 2013; Greene, 1995; hooks, 2003; Nieto, 2003) write of the importance of hope and imagination in educational discourse. Giroux (2013) makes a link between hope and social change when he writes:

> Political exhaustion and impoverished intellectual visions are fed by the widely

popular assumption that there are no alternatives to the present state of affairs (para. 17)… As a form of utopian longing, educated hope opens up horizons of comparison by evoking not just different histories, but also different futures (para. 26).

In the study group, the capacity to imagine alternatives served as a resource for analyzing and changing practice. As I read the transcripts, field notes, and interviews, I noticed that the teachers sometimes switched into a visionary mode in which they expressed images of things being different. I saw these visions functioning as a way for the teachers to engage in "critical world making" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 303), imagine possibilities, and make their desires explicit to themselves and each other. Visions of the possible functioned on pedagogical, classroom, and societal levels.

An example of how visions were expressed on a pedagogical level occurred early on in the group's work together. When Becca expressed a tension that she felt at her school between teaching skills to prepare students for college and teaching in a culturally responsive way, Lucy responded passionately with her desire to have both:

> I got really impassioned right now to be like "if this is not the group that solves your problem, then we will *make* a group to solve your problem." Cause I feel whole heartedly and that there *is* a way to marry the two in a lovely, beautiful marriage. There *is* a way and we can find that way…. That's such an idealist perspective.

Lucy's comment demonstrated a deep desire to find alternative ways of thinking, even when it seemed like there were limited options. These articulations of alternative realities represented moments when the teachers broke free from what *is* and imagined what *could be.*

In addition to expressing a vision of a different kind of pedagogy, as Lucy did, members of the study group sometimes used the space of the group to explore visions of different kinds of worlds. Joel, for example, had travelled abroad to Sweden for his student teaching and was actively coming to consciousness about racial and economic inequality as he lived with his family in an affluent, mostly White, suburb and worked at a close-by school with mostly low-income African American students. He used these experiences to fuel his own imaginings of alternative worlds. In one meeting, he raised the question to the group:

> How would America really look differently if we embraced multiculturalism and multilingualism? What would it actually *look like* if we embraced diversity and valued multiculturalism in our society? Instead of hundreds of White men in congress, it would be more diverse. All our spaces would be more diverse.

Joel's imagining enabled him to create a different reality in his mind, one worth aiming for and drawing on when making decisions about practice. Rather than take the status quo as a given, imagining different social arrangements enables people to see alternative actions, or in the case of the teachers, pedagogies. Later, when the group engaged in a discussion about preparing students for college and careers, Joel drew on Sweden as an example of what our society could look like. He said:

> They have *schools* that are *totally* equitable, for *all* of these different professions. If you're a truck driver or a janitor, there's no stigma. You don't have any fewer resources. Whereas in America, "truck driver" gives you a certain stereotype of a person. Janitor gives you a certain stereotype of a person. When I went to Sweden I was like "wow."

Joel's experience abroad enabled him to imagine a different reality than the one he experienced in the United States, which could serve as the basis for taking action toward that reality.

While in these examples, Joel's imaginings were operating on a societal level, on a more micro-level, the teachers in the study group also expressed hopes and visions for their classrooms. For example, when Becca explored her rationale for focusing on student talk in her classroom, she presented the group with an image of how she wanted her classroom to be:

> If you were to measure or quantify student talk, I want their voices to be equal to mine. I want my classroom to be less teacher-centered, and for the life of the class to come from student talk, from their voices, ideas, and interactions with each other. I want to

guide my students to a place where we use student talk to deepen and build on their understandings of texts, and I want the nature of talk in my room to be something that invests kids, something that engages them.

Becca's repetition of the word *want* indicates a desire to create a different world within her classroom. As she pursued her inquiry, she intentionally worked toward this classroom she imagined. Throughout the course of the study group's work, other group members spoke in similarly visionary terms about their classrooms. In one meeting, Lucy said, "I want my classroom to serve as a little small world that legitimizes where my students come from, but I want my students to leave the classroom and succeed in the quote-unquote game with a capital 'G.'" I asked Lucy to try to define a "successful student" in her class, to which she answered: "my students will be more successful if my classroom culture and my school culture revolved around the idea of meeting in the middle." In this example, Lucy used her vision as a starting point to elaborate on a concept that she found generative.

These examples demonstrate how visions and desires occurred when the teachers freed themselves from some of the perceived constraints of their schools and moved into an imaginative state. They had permission to dream big and articulate alternatives to the status quo. Even when expressed at the level of the classroom, the teachers' desires were connected to large-scale visionary questions like: What do we want for our students and ourselves? What kind of classroom do we hope to create? How do we define success? And what are we working towards? These kinds of questions drove the teachers to continue to search, wonder, and create together.

Theorizing the power and possibility of imagination in educational contexts, Maxine Greene (1995) wrote: "To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or 'common-sensible' and to carve out new orders of experience" (p. 19). These new orders of experience, carved out in the study group teachers' ongoing dialogue, worked as a resource towards changing

practice in ways that were more humanizing and equitable.

Discussion

This analysis shows how this group of teachers mined multiple knowledge sources, or resources, to understand their practice in an era of top-down school reform. It demonstrates how these resources intermingled with each other to open up new ways of looking at students, schools, and practice. By developing a heightened sense of what teachers already know, through self-directed study, years of teaching, and a lifetime of experiences, we, as a field, are able to expand our capacity to better understand the complex ways that they approach their work and raise questions as to how spaces might be designed to support their professional growth. Ultimately, teacher education and professional development that use, rather than ignore, these valuable tools for sense-making will expand teachers' capacity to understand their students and design learning experiences that are responsive to their lives.

Within the context of neoliberal school reform, which privileges profit, efficiency, and competition, and threatens to supplant ideals such as democracy and empathy, it becomes increasingly urgent to create and protect spaces where teachers are able to engage in humanizing learning practices such as the ones described here. Despite the challenges and threats, teachers are coming together to organize their learning in ways that foreground values and aims that run counter to those "best practices" privileged by the neoliberal agenda and instead define best practices based on their own knowledge of their school context, students' communities, and beliefs about what education should look like. For example, in New York, Philadelphia, and other major cities, teacher activist groups are organizing Inquiry into Action Groups (New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2012), which are small groups of teachers who meet for a fixed period of time to learn together and take action on a range of social justice issues identified by group members. The National Writing Project has long operated under the principle of "teachers teaching teachers," with local sites offering opportunities to engage in workshops, institutes, study groups, and book discussions that are led by

other teachers. These organizations serve as inspiring and instructive examples of alternatives to top-down models of teacher learning, and provide support for teachers who choose to approach their practices in ways that run counter to the discourses and goals of the standardization movement.

Each of the resources described in this article – *autobiographical reflexivity, outside readings, interactions with students,* and *visions of the possible* – already existed within the teachers. The space created by the study group enabled the resources to be animated and leveraged for learning, growth, and action. The dialogues, support, and opportunities for collective analysis enabled these resources to be transformed into tools to question assumptions, rethink practice, and see new possibilities for moving forward. Therefore, facilitators of teacher learning and leaders at the school and district level who have the power to shape such opportunities must actively consider how they can create the contexts for the kinds of meaningful collaborations that foreground teachers' questions and insights.

Implications

This study has implications for facilitators of professional development, school administrators, teacher educators, and teachers themselves. Facilitators of teacher learning communities can use the concept of teacher resources to guide their approach. Spaces for teacher learning should include time for developing trust, building relationships, and setting group norms, all practices that lay the foundation for teachers to share candidly and receive valuable feedback. Early on, I facilitated an explicit discussion focused on group norms, in which the teachers shared their goals for being in the group and what they expected of themselves and each other to support their learning. This discussion supported the establishment of a culture of risk, trust, and accountability, which were all values articulated and agreed upon by the teachers. Practices that supported the cultivation and use of resources in the Adolescent Literacy Education Study Group included a combination of structured activities and open dialogue that encouraged problem-posing (Freire, 1970), story sharing, and collective sense-making. In terms of more structured

experiences, teachers in the study group were invited to share influential texts, write critical incidents from their classrooms, and share their personal histories in the form of *Where My Teaching is From* poems.

While there is no one formula for creating spaces that leverage teachers' resources, facilitators of professional development for teachers can ask themselves questions about the kinds of opportunities teachers have to bring what they know to their learning. For example, they can ask: *Where are the spaces where teachers are explicitly invited to share their own autobiographies, critically examine their experiences, and consider their experiences in relation to others'? Where are the spaces for teachers to share the authors, thinkers, and concepts that currently influence their practice, gain windows into the influences of other teachers, and expand their lenses for viewing their work? Where are the spaces for teachers to share and get feedback on stories of interactions with students that may lead them to question their assumptions about teaching, see their classroom from another perspective, or learn from their students? Where are the spaces where teachers are encouraged to imagine alternatives to how things currently are in their classrooms, in their schools, in their communities, and in society? Where can they articulate their desires outside of the frames of accountability and efficiency that are prevalent in the current climate of reform?*

School leaders and those in positions of advocating for school-wide change must consider how they can structure environments so as to allow for more teacher-driven, intellectually engaged professional development. Within cultures that value the certainty of a universal set of "best practices," school leaders must consciously work to trust teachers to generate theories of practice that are grounded in their lives, the lives of their students, and their visions for a more socially-just society. While professional development practices that leverage teachers' resources take time for trust-building, sharing, and critical reflection, they have the potential to support teachers in creating more humanizing learning environments for students. To create professional development that has the capacity to keep teachers in the profession, we need to use, rather than ignore, the intellectual resources

that they bring. School leaders can ask themselves questions such as: *Do teachers at my school have spaces within the current professional development offerings to engage with the daily dilemmas of practice and pursue their own questions? Do they have space to grapple with issues related to race, gender, sexuality, class, and other forms of difference, in a critical, yet supportive, space made up of other educators? Are there places where their outside intellectual interests can be valued and leveraged for their professional learning? Are there spaces where they can connect with other educators interested in similar issues?* Rather than exclusively measuring the success of professional development by student scores on high-stakes tests, school leaders can view the success of professional development in terms of its capacity to leverage knowledge sources that teachers already bring to their work through ongoing critical dialogue.

This study has implications for teacher educators as well. Positioning teachers as generators, rather than recipients, of knowledge of teaching can start with the education of pre-service teachers. Within a wave of neoliberal reform in which schools are turning professional development over to curriculum-makers, teacher education programs must offer spaces for pre-service teachers to engage in critical analysis of these formats for professional development and expose them to alternative forms of teacher learning. In addition to constructing classroom spaces that enable pre-service teachers to draw on their resources and raise critical questions about the status quo, teacher education programs can provide images of intellectually stimulating professional development. In the work that I do with pre-service teachers, for example, I have class sessions devoted to the topic *Becoming Literacy Educators,* where part of my aim is to provide images

of meaningful, intellectually engaged professional learning. Students read excerpts from Meenoo Rami's (2014) book, *Thrive: Five Ways to (Re)Invigorate Your Teaching,* which is organized around five themes related to pursuing their own questions and building a professional community. In addition, students go online to explore and report on various teacher organizations and networks as a starting point for considering the kinds of networks that they might like to join. It is my hope that when these students become teachers, they will see teacher learning as extending beyond what their district or school offers them.

Finally, this study has implications for teachers themselves. While the current neoliberal climate threatens spaces for critical, humanizing dialogues, teachers must remain committed to carving out spaces to engage with other educators in meaningful ways. Depending on teachers' professional position, relationships within the building, and degree of tenure, they can advocate for and create a wider range of professional development formats, such as book discussion groups, study groups on issues of importance to teachers, and workshops that draw on the knowledge of the teachers in the building.

I hope this study will lead to additional studies on professional development spaces that seriously consider the resources that teachers bring to their work as they make sense of their practice. Accounts of teachers coming together to inquire into their practice have the potential to both empower other groups of teachers to create similar conditions for themselves, and add to a growing body of scholarship that calls for more humanizing, democratic, and intellectually engaging learning opportunities for teachers and their students.

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Appendix A
Table 1

Table 1
Adolescent Literacy Education Study Group

Teacher	Yrs. Teaching	Type of School and Grade	Students' Race as Reported by Teachers	Teachers' Race and Background Marked Salient in Discussions
Joel	2	Comprehensive Neighborhood School Grade 10	Majority African American	White Suburban
Mary	4	College Preparatory Magnet School Grade 12	Majority African American	White Catholic School
Melissa	3	K-8 Elementary School Grades 7 and 8	Majority African American	White Rural Background
Lucy	9	Program for 18-21 year olds returning for high school diploma	Majority African American	White Rural Background
Becca	10	College Preparatory Charter School Grades 8 and 12	70% African American, 30% Asian and White	White Southern Background