Making Inquiry Intentional and Intertextual

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Many teachers build sets of related materials focused on topics or themes such as families, friendship, or courage, or on critical issues such as homelessness, racism, and sexism. These text sets (Crafton, 1981) highlight the importance of making connections during and after reading, something valued in our reading/writing curriculum. Intertextuality, however, is more than connecting one text to another or actively trying to find a personal link while reading. It involves inquiries and purposeful thinking about a set of related materials that can progressively transform readers and their understandings.

In this issue of School Talk we bring the ideas of purposefulness and intertextuality together through a teaching practice we call intentional intertextual inquiry. This is a learning framework that expands our thinking about students' meaning-making processes as they engage in "grand conversations" (Peterson & Eods, 1999)—whole-class or small-group discussions focused around texts. The framework combines inquiry-based learning and intertextuality with intentional thinking both before introducing an inquiry-based theme to students and throughout the entire learning experience.

What Is Inquiry?

Asking questions is at the core of learning and the heart of how even our youngest learners construct understandings of their world. When toddlers experience some aspect of the world that's meaningful to them, they become curious about it, ask questions, and examine it more deeply. Like all of us, young children pursue their questions in social environments, benefiting from the talk and perspectives of others. These natural processes for learning can be used to structure learning experiences in school.

When teachers tap into their students' sense of wonder and excitement about a topic and allow them to construct understandings about it through questioning and interacting, students begin to lay claim to their own learning. All students come to school with compelling questions arising from their
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experiences, as well as their individual background knowledge, opinions, and other intellectual resources. We support an inquiry-based approach because it allows all students to actively engage in learning in the classroom by tapping into what interests them and what they already know.

What Is Intextuality?

Intextuality refers to the ways that texts—whether written, visual, or spoken—are interpreted, one in light of the other. In its simplest form, this concept is used as a comprehension strategy as students make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections during and after reading. However, for intextuality to fully enrich students' comprehension and interpretation, these connections must be considered part of a larger, more sophisticated meaning-making process. As students respond to multiple texts in multiple settings around a theme, they spin a web of connections. One student's connection is used by another student to make a new connection; a link made between two texts then emerges as a central theme and is used to connect with other texts. Through this process, students create layers of meanings and new understandings.

What Does It Mean to Be Intentional?

Inquiry-based learning and intextuality are both generative processes. Students' learning unfolds as they pose questions and work collaboratively through grand conversations around a topic or theme. But there is more to creating curriculum than selecting a topic and talking about it. Students' depth of understanding often depends on how intentional, or deliberate, the teachers' intentional work may include educating themselves about the topic, determining significant content or issues they want students to explore, selecting resources that match students' interests and abilities, and organizing educational experiences that will enhance students' learning.

Intentional Work before a Study

The teachers who write in this issue, Sarah and Silvia, spend time doing "adult work" before they invite students into a thematic conversation. They begin by selecting a theme with the potential for enriching students' understandings of the world. Sometimes the theme is determined by the school's curriculum, sometimes by students' interests, and other times by the teacher, as is the case in the inquiry studies presented in this issue.

Intentional Work during a Study

Sarah's and Silvia's intentional work was informed by their knowledge of the theme and related critical issues, as well as by their knowledge of the students and their social and cultural histories. During the first few weeks of the study, both teachers engaged the whole class by reading aloud the same texts. The last few weeks were devoted to small-group literature studies of novels related to the theme. Students discussed the texts daily, and as they responded, the teachers listened and took notes. Sometimes they asked the children to talk more about what they were thinking or to share a related experience; other times they simply jot

return to it later. Sarah and Silvia also listened for responses that lifted the level of the discussion. For example, after one student pointed out the metamorphosis metaphor in the book La Mariposa (Jimenez, 1998), another student referred to metamorphosis when describing the mother's development in ¡Sí, Se Pueden! (Cohn, 2005). Intentional teaching also occurred when the teachers gave names to ideas that students discussed but didn't have language for; for example, when the students discussed the benefits of people coming together to stand up for their rights, the teachers introduced the word "solidarity" to represent this power and then made available other texts to illustrate the concept.

The teachers later reread their notes, looking for recurring themes they wanted students to review, reflect upon, and make part of their developing understandings of migrant family life. As Silvia looked over a week's worth of discussion responses, she realized that her students had discussed several critical issues, including unfair working and living conditions, racial profiling, migrants not standing up for themselves, and solidarity. The next day she reviewed these concepts with her fifth graders so they could think about where these ideas had occurred, and what they meant both to the people in the texts and to their own lives. These themes became connections that students used again and again throughout the study.

By intentionally teaching students to draw out, work through, reflect on, make, and apply connections (both figuratively and literally) as they explored a topic important to their lives and worlds, Sarah and Silvia not only enriched students' understandings of immigration, they also added new chapters to the narratives of their students' lives. ▲
My first graders are full of wonder. They wonder about shape-shifting clouds and dust-devil whirlwinds. They question where babies come from and whether frogs and toads are really friends. They also wonder about their lives as Latino children who are too often confronted with the harsh realities of being poor or marked because of the color of their skin. Recently I began to wonder what would happen if I approached children's wonderings about social realities the same way I approach their wonderings about shape-shifting clouds and dust-devil whirlwinds. I wondered what would happen if I incorporated inquiry into our grand conversations around social issues that affect our lives.

I began my inquiry by joining my fifth-grade colleague, Silvia, in a literature study unit focused on the lives of migrant workers. Silvia and I selected multiple texts that reflected the experiences of migrant families and then provided students with response prompts to encourage an inquiry stance. We listened carefully to capture the texts of students' lives, so their stories could be used as a resource to make sense of what we were studying. Over a four-week period, I recorded students' responses and used them to create ongoing inquiries. During the last week of the study, the children engaged in literature study groups. One of these small groups was joined by five of Silvia's fifth-grade students in a conversation around The Circuit (Jiménez, 1997).

Before introducing students to the unit, I provided them with response prompts (See Figure 1) that I hoped would move them away from their typical "I liked..." response toward a more inquiry-driven response. After reading The Rainbow Tulip (Mora, 1999), one student commented, "I noticed her mother isn't like the other mothers. She wore black and brown and not bright colors or tacones [heels]." Without prompting, another student replied, "Yes, I think it's good, because if they all dressed alike, you couldn't tell them apart." However, it was after reading Friends from the Other Side (Anzaldúa, 1993), a story about a boy who came illegally with his family from the other side (Mexico) and is living in fear of being caught by "La Migra," that I realized the benefits of the prompts. One student said the story made him feel sad for the boy who was called a "wet-back," because he, too, has been called that name, even though his family is here legally. He went on to ask, "La Migra se lleva la gente al otro lado... Verdad, que son vans?" [The border patrol takes people to the other side. They are vans, right?] These responses became new texts, new narratives to use to make sense of what was happening. This was evident, for example,

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Sarah’s Story
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when Raul said that “this reminded me of when my cousin couldn’t come to the States because he didn’t have ‘special papers.’”

Creating Curriculum from Students’ Responses

Rather than recording student responses in my notebook, I charted them on butcher paper so we could access them throughout the study as we read across texts. I categorized students’ responses under the headings of Facts, Connections, Wonderings, and Other. The Facts column informed me of what children knew about the topic and of their misunderstandings, as well. The Connections column helped me see what the topic meant to the children, their families, and their world. The Wonderings column gave me insight into what mattered to the children and what they wanted to know. Collectively, the students’ responses guided our study and determined the focus it would take. Anise, for example, noticed a migrant worker in one of the stories who had blisters on his arms. I recorded this response under “Facts.” Later, as I reflected on it, I wondered if students understood the harsh realities of migrant life. As I explored this with them the following day, I realized they didn’t, so I gathered books that made visible these realities and invited students to interview my uncle, who was a migrant worker. When Cristina recalled going to Mexico with her grandma, and said, “Some people didn’t have shoes or shirts because they’re old, they look like Indians,” I recorded her response under Connections. As I wrote, I wondered why Cristina used the word “Indian.” Where had this reference come from? The rest of the day I thought about this response and questioned if Cristina was already reading her world through a biased lens?

As I reflected on the charts collectively, I looked for emerging patterns to focus future explorations. For example, I noted several places where students’ responses alluded to racial profiling. In The Rainbow Tulip, students made assumptions about the mother’s worth based on the color of her clothes. They noticed children in Friends from the Other Side judging another child based on the color of his skin. They heard a similar story from a classmate who had been called “wet-back” because of the color of his skin. Then there was Cristina, using the word “Indian” pejoratively. Racial profiling is not a concept I would normally address with first graders, but their responses showed me that it’s a concept they are familiar with and affected by.

Students also searched for patterns across texts. We revisited the literature and shared and reviewed our charts to find connections between and
among the various books. After one review, Cassandra said, “In three stories, they [migrant workers] moved a lot.” The students also noted that the families in all the books were poor. Racial profiling, unfair working conditions, and poverty were only three social issues named and explored.

Responses to *Going Home* (Bunting, 1994) revealed that many of my students are or have been separated from relatives in Mexico. And the book generated many questions, such as: “Why do families choose to live in two different places?” “Why do people need ‘special papers’ to visit relatives?” I was especially struck when one student said, “You need papers or you can’t come back, forever.” What in his life caused him to say that?

Through whole-group discussions, students wove together multiple texts to create a new narrative about migrant life which, in turn, became the major resource for the literature studies that culminated our unit. I told the children these discussions would differ from our whole-group discussions: I would be responsible for reading aloud the story, and their job was to follow along and discuss what they were thinking. I didn’t mention the inquiry prompts. Without my participation, the children constructed understandings beyond my wildest imagination. When I read aloud the last chapter of *The Circuit* (titled “To Have and to Hold”), five of my first graders were joined by five of Silvia’s fifth graders. After I finished reading, the children zoomed in on La Migra. They recalled that La Migra is the border patrol and “their job is to look for people who don’t have special papers.” As the students talked, one first grader mentioned how her mom listens to the radio to see if La Migra is around. She worries they will catch family members. Others continued the conversation:

*How come just some people get special papers?* (First grader)

*They don’t get papers because they don’t know how to write.* (First grader)

*Cause they don’t know English, they can’t read the papers.* (First grader)

*It’s not fair that only the people that know how to write can get papers.* (First grader)

*My mom says that life is not fair. Maybe they don’t have money.* (Fifth grader)

*But why don’t they let them see their family?* (First grader)

As their conversation continued, I was amazed by the number of topics the children discussed and the depth of what they said.

These responses rang out in the air and echoed in my head. As I listened, the discussion got louder and louder. More students opened up. Two students expressed concern about families being separated, and having some family members sent back to Mexico while others stayed in the States. First-grader Ililiana’s worried face expressed her feelings as loudly as her words: “But that is not fair, how come they don’t let everyone come?” Roberto, who is in the fifth grade, tried to answer the question by suggesting that if everyone is allowed to come into the country, it would be too crowded. Nina, also a fifth grader, offered a different idea. She watched the news, and she thinks many Mexicans are perceived as “bad people” who bring things like drugs into the country. First-grader Anise echoed an earlier discussion and shouted, “My dad is Mexican and he doesn’t bring in drugs!”

As their conversation continued, I was amazed by the number of topics the children discussed and the depth of what they said. Nina ended our grand conversation by asking, “I wonder why they take people back to Mexico, if all they want is a better life?” “Me too,” I responded, breaking my promise not to speak.
I'm constantly telling Karen, "My students are so smart, they know so much." Her reply is always the same, "Silvia, it doesn't just happen; you have a lot to do with it." I decided to make my moves transparent by documenting what I do to facilitate students' grand conversations.

Preparing for Grand Conversations

My decision to study immigration was intentional and two-fold. It's a component of the district's fifth-grade social studies curriculum, which focuses on the United States. It's also a topic relevant to my students' and my lives. We are mostly children and grandchildren of immigrants who came to the States from Mexico for a better life, yet we live in a hostile environment surrounded by negative rhetoric suggesting that people who look and sound like us are violent law breakers. I hoped that through grand conversations, we could examine immigration historically and culturally, gain a critical awareness of conditions that perpetuate inequities faced by many immigrants each day, and gain confidence that what is being said about us is the exception, not the rule.

Collecting and Examining Texts

I believe the more I know about a topic the more my students will learn. Therefore, for this study, I immersed myself in texts like The Line between Us (Bigalow, 2006) and Shadowed Lives (Chávez, 1991) that added depth to what I know about the history of Mexican immigration and the complexities of documented and undocumented immigrants' lives. I read newspapers, viewed videos, revisited my own history with my father, and watched the nightly news to increase my awareness of state and federal legislation and current events related to immigration. I consciously selected student texts that provided critical awareness of the unfair living and working conditions many immigrants face each day. I included La Mariposa and Harvesting Hope (Krub, 2003) in our text set because they illuminate the oppression people experience when they are denied the right to use their home language. I included La Línea (Jaramillo, 2006) and Friends from the Other Side to give us a glimpse of the harsh realities of border crossings. I made available ¡Si, Se Puede! and Esperanza Rising (Ryan, 2000) to provoke discussions about ways people come together to fight against and undo dominant systems of oppression.

As I gathered books, I read them individually and collectively, noting ways that they echoed or linked to other texts. I also recorded ways that disparate ideas in a single text were linked together through metaphor. In The Rainbow Tulip, for instance, the sweet and sour sorbet seemed to be an apt description of the family's life in the States, and by extension, a description of many of my students' lives. Josh Groban's song, "You Raise Me Up" seemed like a way to explore the closing line, "You are ready now," in Friends from the Other Side. I wondered what students would do with these two texts if placed side-by-side for their interpretation.

It is my usual practice to invite students into grand conversations, then step back and take notes while they talk. When I do enter into their conversations, it's intentional. It might be to guide them through big ideas they are struggling with, like the time I tried to help a group negotiate a back-and-forth conversation about the pros and cons of migrant workers striking for higher wages. Sometimes I enter to "up the ante" and nudge students toward deeper meanings. I did this when the students were discussing the healing metaphor in Friends from the Other Side. I wondered if that metaphor applied to other people and events we had discussed in our unit of study. In no time at all, all sorts of healers emerged from books (Francisco in La
we didn’t take action in this study, this experience offered the students a narrative in which to envision ways to change oppressive social conditions.

During the last week of our study, the students formed small literature study groups, with each group reading and discussing a different book. As the students talked, I sat back and listened. My intentional work was done. Now I would observe and document how students used what they learned in our three-week intentional study of immigration to interpret and make sense of new narratives related to immigration. I was actually amazed how soon it happened. A few minutes into one group’s initial conversation, I overheard Juliana saying, “The federales profiled Javier because of his accent.” Another student nodded in agreement, and asked his classmates if they noticed that the federal was a Guatemalan man, not a U.S. border patrol agent profiling a Mexican. The students were quiet for a moment, taking in what that meant. I smiled. I knew our next unit of study had just been launched. ▲

Web Resources

César E. Chávez (1927–1993)
http://chavez.cde.ca.gov/ModelCurriculum/Teachers/index1.aspx

Migrant Workers’ Children
http://users.owt.com/rpeto/migrant/migrant.html

Myths and Facts about Migrant Workers and Immigration
http://www.diversitycouncil.org/immigrants.shtml

The Plight of the Migrant Worker
http://youtube.com/watch?v=AyMc6X2hdgM&feature=related