I from gang sings growing up in a neighborhood with people who don't care who you are if you say something you might get jumped. One memory I remember is when my big brother got shot because he had a gun. The new one he got is more likely, going with him in his car. That has the front wind shield broken by a crackhead who wasn't in a good mood. At least my brother tells me he will always be there for me telling me to not like like that and not to even do what he does. He never has a gun and he also tells me not to sell or do drugs.

OFFICIAL PORTRAITS AND UNOFFICIAL COUNTERPORTRAITS OF ‘AT RISK’ STUDENTS

Writing Spaces in Hard Times

Richard J. Meyer
Helping children find their voices and the power of their writing is crucial for their success as writers, particularly in the current repressive educational setting in which many economically poor children attend school. This book chronicles 5th and 6th grade writers—children of gang members, drug users, poor people, and non-documented and documented immigrants—in a rural school in the southwest US coming into their voices, cultivating those voices, and using those voices in a variety of venues, beginning with the classroom community and spreading outward. Such children are showing up in schools and in research more and more. In their writing, they make sense of who they are as writers and human beings and ultimately learn that their voices carry presence and power.

At the heart of this book is the cultivation of tension between official and unofficial portraits of these students. Official portraits are composed of demographic data, socioeconomic data, and test results. Students tend to appropriate the language of failure about themselves, their school, and the community that is found in their official portrait. Unofficial counterportraits offer different views of children, schools, and communities. The big ideas of official and unofficial portraits are presented, then each chapter offers data (the children’s and teachers’ processes and products) and facets of the theoretical construct of counterportraits, as a response to official portraits. The counterportraits are built slowly in order to base them in evidence and to articulate their complexity.

Many teachers and soon-to-be teachers facing the dilemmas and complexities of teaching in diverse classrooms have serious questions about how to honor students’ lives outside of school, making school more relevant. This book addresses these critical (for student success) issues and presents teaching as the political activity that it is. It offers evidence to present to the public, legislators, and the press as a way of talking back to official portraits, demonstrating that officially failing schools are not really failing—evidence that is crucial for the survival of public schools.

Richard J. Meyer is Professor in the Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies at the College of Education, University of New Mexico.
Official Portraits and Unofficial Counterportraits of ‘At Risk’ Students

Writing Spaces in Hard Times

Richard J. Meyer
University of New Mexico
For the children, teachers, and families at Mesa Vista Elementary School. Thank you for teaching me, for revealing your remarkable strength, power, and truthfulness and for your willingness to show others what you know and who you are.
For Sadie and Zoe who taught me how children write.
For Robert Solomon Wilson and the next generation of thinkers and writers.
For Pat.
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One memory I remember is when my big brother got shot because he had a gun. The new one he got is more smaller. Going with him in his low-rider that has the front windshield broken by a crack head who wasn’t in a good mood. At least my brother tells me he will always be there for me telling me to not live like this and not to ever do what he does, never to have a gun like he does. He also says to never sell or do drugs. He said to work for what I want. He also says if I want something bad enough, I will get it. He said if he can go back in time he would change everything. Me and my brother are closer than ever. We stick together. We both grew up without dads.

(Jesus, a sixth grader)

This book is the story of the writers in two classrooms, one fifth grade and one sixth grade, in an economically poor rural school that has never achieved ‘adequate yearly progress’ status. Mesa Vista Elementary School (all names of the school, children, and teachers in this book are pseudonyms) is located 25 miles from a medium sized southwestern US city. All the children in the school receive free breakfast and lunch, a fact included here as a measure of economic poverty. Most of the children learned Spanish as their first language, either in Mexico or the US. Over 20 percent of the children are homeless, some of their family members are not documented visitors to the US, and most of the students, teachers, and the community have appropriated the idea that MVE is a chronically ‘failing’ school. Officially, it is a high poverty school, in a high crime area, with low scores. Jesus’ piece might confirm the cold data about the school and the community. But it is also the story of two brothers’ love for each other. This is the first piece he’s written in school about what really happens at home and within it are many of the themes of this book: hope, struggle, poverty, gangs, families, and drugs. Working internally, collaboratively, and across contexts, the children and their teachers undertook to disappropriate the official portrait of failure that became central to their school identities. At the end of our year together, Esperanza, a sixth grader, wrote this brief poem:
Esperanza’s words capture what happened for many of the children as they learned to write, learned through writing, and learned about writing (adapting Halliday, 1978). There was one guiding principle in all of our work together, a brief sentence that I shared with the teachers before working with the children and with the children once that work began: Tell your truths. I repeated this sentence frequently, almost like a mantra at times, imploring the children to do what many were previously forbidden to do: tell the truths about their out-of-school lives by writing and talking about them in school. One of the most important findings in this work was that the children may seem ‘at risk,’ and to some degree, they are—of failing in school. But there are larger risks that we need to consider, particularly the risks that we face when schools fail children. There is the risk that an intelligent and literate populus, like the children in this study, pose to the status quo; the risk that their truths pose to the comfort of those in power; and the risks that we face when their potentials are left untapped.

There was much testing of the challenge to tell their truths. Some joked, some avoided, and some took risks. Some dove in with a passion and intensity they’d never experienced in school and some observed their colleagues from the sidelines to witness the impact and results of their truthfulness. Eventually, through very different means across classrooms, they presented their truths and the truths of others in their community. The children studied and wrote about adults they love, using digital voice recorders, cameras, and various strategies for interviewing, collecting, and understanding artifacts in their community. They worked with each other in class to explore and compose. The pages that follow are saturated with their work, their thinking, their stories, their poetry, and narratives about their loved ones. There are funny pieces about mischievous fathers and serious pieces about gang deaths, drugs, poverty, stress, love and loss, families whole and caring, and families disrupted into chaos. The work was accompanied by tears, laughter, sharing, privacy, bringing forth and withdrawing, lightness, and intensity. There were clashes and calm periods, teacher angst and angst resolved only to be reborn, and all the complexities of exceeding the borders of safety and history to venture into new areas of thought, emotionality, relationships, and spirit.

The children not only read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), they wrote and rewrote their words and worlds as they composed and made sense of different versions of the truths in their lives. They struggled with the difficulties of their home and school lives coupled with the realities of adolescence and the creation of new and different relationships between themselves and their teachers.
Overview

The chapters in this book are a chronological presentation of our work. The analyses that are part of each chapter are ever-deepening considerations of the work and I draw upon a wide variety of literatures because, “Critically conscious research represents multiple, intersecting, and interdisciplinary principles and processes” (Willis et al., 2008, p. 51).

In Chapter 1, I explain how I met the teachers in a summer workshop that I taught and their invitation (or perhaps it was a dare or a challenge) to demonstrate the ways in which ideas from the workshop might be incorporated into classroom lives steeped in required programs and ongoing testing. I provide the hard facts about the district and the school, facts about: poverty, test scores, language, economics, and more. That data forms the foundation of an official portrait of the school; counterportraits are vehicles for challenging, interrogating, and undermining the official portrait. But counterportraits are not simply composed and left; rather they are ongoing political projects to disappropriate official portraits of race, identity, language, achievement, and culture.

In Chapter 2, the work of counterportraiture is initiated in the sixth grade classroom as I challenge the students to write their truths, take risks, and tell stories that have never before been told in school. The chapter is an introduction to the sixth graders as writers, thinkers, and children living lives in the “other America” (Polakow, 1993). Each chapter, beginning with Chapter 2, ends with a section on emerging counterportraits as part of the analysis of the data presented in the particular chapter.

In Chapter 3, the theoretical work moves to claiming (or reclaiming) spaces for writers in the two classrooms. Barbara, the fifth grade teacher, wants the children to do something that they will never forget, but wrestles with what that might be, particularly in the environment of a tightly controlled curriculum. In the sixth grade, the writers work on identity pieces, like the one written by Jesus at the beginning of this preface. Yet they don’t trust each other. Some of them have family members in rival gangs, some of them know each other from church, and some of them found the safety that silence and being invisible in school provide. Relationships arise as a critical facet of writing spaces—not only relationships with each other as colleagues in writing, but with their teacher, Patia.

In Chapter 4, safety is not such a tenuous issue in the fifth grade because Barbara has worked to create a community of trust. Barbara brings up the idea of ‘biography’ as a project for the class and she and I discuss the possibility of writing biographies of loved ones, rather than strangers, and of using primary research strategies. We begin by inviting the children to write biographies of each other, teaching strategies of interviewing, listening, note taking, and composing. The children learn new things about each other, deepening their connections as writers as they find out about: prebirth traumas, pet ducks,
families’ countries of origin, and stories of growing up in Mexico and the US. Goffman’s idea of “permeability” (1961) helps explain how a community might change when information from the outside is brought into school. The sixth graders explore growth and change as they write about ways in which their lives have evolved. Their writing suggests moves from places of trust to less trust, from hope to less hopeful, and from secure to less secure (emotionally, financially, and even academically).

In Chapter 5, the fifth graders move from biographies of colleagues to studying someone outside of school. They approach loved ones to collect stories that are not only new to them, but also serve to create an air of excitement and curiosity in the classroom as recordings and photos are brought to school and discussed. The fifth graders invest increasing amounts of time in their biography work. The sixth graders struggle with issues of love in their writing, telling stories of loved ones and hesitating to commit to genres beyond poetry. The theoretical section of this chapter explores the idea of legitimacy in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and extends that consideration into the ongoing counterportraits being composed.

Beginning in Chapter 6 and continuing for the next few chapters, individual fifth grade writers are featured because of the depth and intensity of their work on the biography. The sixth graders are presented en masse to demonstrate the variety of writing styles, the intensity of their experiences, and their struggles as writers, learners, and human beings. Theoretically, I submit the idea of ‘inertia,’ borrowing from physics, as a concept applicable to the view of the children in their official portrait. Within the life of a school, the inertia of the official portrait serves not only to perpetuate a view of the students, their school, and the community, but serves the extant power structure by not challenging the distribution of wealths that yield profit, including: economic, literacy, linguistic, and cultural wealths. In the counterportraiture section of this chapter, I suggest that interrogating and challenging the official portrait is the friction or torque that may influence the inertia of the official portrait. Friction is expressed as finding voice, ending silence, and providing opportunities (venues) for voices to be heard.

In Chapter 7, the sixth graders explore darkness as a theme in their lives. Miguel writes:

**Dark Tears**

When I look into my grandma’s eyes

I see her folding covers in my uncle’s room.

folding clothes for someone very special
as tears and praying
was all she did
But tears fall down
and she realizes
He is no longer with
us.

Death is one of the dark struggles that seems to haunt the children on an almost daily basis as friends and relatives die in car crashes and through acts of violence. In the fifth grade, the works of Chuck and Estevan are featured as two writers uncovering their pasts and themselves. The theme of ‘struggle’ is discussed as it relates to the counterportraits that the children are composing of themselves. I rely upon Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of carnival to explain the ways borders and rules are shifting as the writers go deeper into their work.

In Chapter 8, I use the idea of “hybridity” (Bakhtin, 1981; Dyson, 2003), to explain the space that the writers composed in order to write. This is the origin of the subtitle of this book, ‘Writing Spaces in Hard Times,’ specifically the use of the word ‘writing’ to mean two things: articulating the space in which to write and committing thoughts to paper (or monitor) within those spaces. A hybrid in nature is typically better equipped for survival; a hybrid space is one in which a writer is cultivated for growth and efficacy.

Chapter 9 is a presentation of some of the pieces that the children presented to the public, a discussion of how they were received, and their work with the Albuquerque slam poetry team. Initially, the students were writing for themselves and each other, but as the audience expanded to other individuals, including families, so did the influence of their work. The impact of their work on future teachers, the poets, and their families is interpreted as expanded spheres of influence.

In Chapter 10, I document the closing down of our year’s work as the children reflect in notes, such as Esperanza’s earlier in this preface. Reflective of her voice, new understanding of the purposes for writing, and insights into writing as counterportraiture, Verdad wrote, “I would like you to know that people just don’t write for fun; they write to express to other people,” as part of her final evaluation of the year’s work. I use critical literacy to complete the counterportraiture work of this chapter, reviewing how the children interrogated and acted upon their worlds (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

In Chapter 11, I present the final layer of analyses looking across all of the chapters. I revisit and explain ‘struggles’ in greater depth after considering the role of joy, the purposes of school, and the spirit of the child as themes and areas for further research. The appendices contain more of the children’s work, some heuristics they used to support their writing, and a discussion of counterportraiture as method and its inherent political nature.
Our year of work changed some people’s minds: the children’s about writing, their teachers’ about the nature of composing in school, future teachers’ about ‘at-risk, failing children,’ family members, and mine about the portraits of children, who gets to compose them, how they are used, and how they might be disrupted.
The children and teachers in the fifth and sixth grade classrooms were patient, caring, and daring over the course of our year together. I thank you all for your time, energy, and willingness to tell your truths. Thank you to the families in the ‘Mesa Vista’ neighborhoods for allowing me to work with your children and affording me insights into your lives, strengths, hopes, and truths. Naomi Silverman continues to inspire many authors, myself included, to take risks in our work, tell our truths, and rely upon her for support throughout the entire process of birthing a book. Thank you to others at Routledge, including Meeta Pendharkar, for your support with all the details. Rae Ramirez, Susana Ibara Johnson, and Zoe Nellie Gastelum helped with translations, not an easy task and one for which I am grateful. Thanks to Chuck Jurich for generous technology support. Thank you to the three reviewers of this book who invested many hours and offered wisdom, feedback, and honesty. Finally, thank you to Dr. Kathryn F. Whitmore for always taking my phone calls, challenging my thinking, and reminding me why we do the work we do.
Prologue

“Peace is threatened by unjust economic, social and political order, absence of democracy, environmental degradation and the absence of human rights.”
(M. Yunus, 2006, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize)

Writing Spaces and Hard Times

Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Prize for Economics in December 2006, five months after I met the teachers and children that are in this book. His work to help poor families and villages in remote Bangladesh involved making small low-interest loans to individuals for as little as the equivalent of twenty five US dollars. They used the money to initiate business activities that ultimately led to self-sustenance and an increased sense of dignity and quality of life. Yunus’ understanding of poverty and his use of microeconomics (small loans to tiny businesses) resonates with the emotional and cognitive poverty that teachers, children, and communities in this book are experiencing under the constant thrashing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (US Department of Education [DOE], 2001a). Consistent with Yunus’ lending model, we ‘borrowed’ small amounts of time from the official mandated curriculum to help children and teachers see themselves not as failures, but as thoughtful writers with important things to say, enhancing their sense of dignity and, perhaps, the quality of their lives. Until Yunus and others like him began their work, economic poverty was a force in motion that seemed relentless in perpetuating itself. Yunus worked to disrupt economic poverty by offering hope enacted through a real and tangible investment. This book is the story of teachers, students, and a researcher working to find hope in the punitive context of the ESEA, euphemistically subtitled No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

The economic conditions in which the children in this study live are poor by US standards, though not as poor as those that Yunus serves. The poverties described and analyzed in this book, some of which were acted upon, include economic poverty and also the pernicious educative (Dewey, 1938) poverties
that perpetuate the in-school bracketing of children’s lives beyond the school. Such poverty includes the silencing of teachers forced to use certain approaches and programs to teach reading and writing because of the political and economic power that certain groups have amassed (Spring, 2002). Publishers and legislation have reduced teaching and schools to pedagogical ghettos for profits at the emotional and cognitive expense of children and their teachers (Altwerger, 2005).

Within this political context, the idea of *writing spaces*, from the title of this book, has two meanings. First, it refers to locations or places in which children get to write; these are physical, social, and emotional places. Second, *writing spaces* means composing those spaces in which the writing takes place. *Writing spaces* means both having (articulating) the space and using (enacting) it. At present, if children get to write in school, the space and time are often co-opted by a program aimed at raising test scores. Professional teachers are degraded and their rights as thoughtful practitioners are dismissed in such spaces. As Yunus suggests, peace for teachers, children, researchers, families and communities is threatened because their right to encourage thought and agency are vulnerable when they are coerced into compliance—“the absence of human rights”—instead of encouraged to be reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983; Shannon, 1989).

The peace that exists as thought collectives in which multiple perspectives about self, language, culture, experiences, and literacy activity are welcomed is not present in many schools, staff development sessions, and adopted programs. This peace is not a quiet place of unanimous agreement on all ideas nor is it the artificial complacency induced by standardized programs and forced compliance. Peace is a contentious, yet safe, place in which we can be pushed to reconsider our most deeply held beliefs as we examine economic, social, political—even spiritual—dimensions of democracy. It is a place of deep and profound honesty and is not always comfortable. Sadly, many teachers and children are ghettoized into a legislated poverty that is perpetuated by the absence of their basic human rights of thought, justice, action, and dissent. This is what I mean by *hard times* in the title of this book. The teachers and children in this book wrote in a different way from the way being dictated by the district and state, intuitively living what Yunus did to address economic poverty by addressing intellectual poverty. We did this in microspaces, small pieces of time in which we lived all the struggles of authentic writers. We had to do so in microspaces because most of the schedule was consumed by prescribed programs with predetermined uses of time and space. In the epilogue, I return to Yunus’ work to reconsider the power of *writing spaces* to change lives.
Chapter 1

An Introduction to Searching for Our Truths

“How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg?
Four. Calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg.”

(Abraham Lincoln)

Lincoln’s humor and brilliance shine in this riddle attributed to him (Lincoln, n.d.) and perhaps we smile as we read it because of the play on the nature of truth inherent in it. A tail is not a leg simply because someone says it, yet a school is labeled as ‘failing’ if a test score says it. Apparently, sometimes a tail is a leg, if a legislature says that the definition of ‘leg’ will, from this point hence, be so adjusted. Similarly, a school may be considered failing if the children do not perform on a test at a certain predetermined level if that’s the legislated definition of failure. When those in power mandate such truth, it seems to have a domino effect as the public believes it, states and districts act upon it as truth, and eventually children, teachers, and families appropriate a legislated truth as the truth. One of the goals of this research was to look at the tail-being-called-a-leg in education and interrogate it. The work begins with teachers asked to tell their truths and to interrogate the worthiness of those truths and then extends into classrooms asking fifth and sixth graders to do the same thing. In this chapter I explain how I met the teachers and was invited into their classrooms and introduce the ideas of the official portrait and counterportraits.

Before the Work Began

One of the outcomes of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act called No Child Left Behind (US DOE, 2001a) is that individuals like me are decreasingly asked to do professional development with teachers. We just don’t fit the mold of what is expected when using federal money to address the panic that has set in about not achieving adequate yearly progress as defined in the Act. In early June of 2006 I was surprised when I received a phone call from a doctoral student who was also an administrator and professional developer at a local school district. She was a bit frantic because she had worked for almost
a full year to plan a summer conference for teachers from her school district, just north of Albuquerque, and a neighboring district south of Albuquerque. The one-week workshop would run from 8:30 to 4:30 daily and was intended to be an intensive introduction to a view of literacy that the districts were adopting. The teachers would be divided into two groups, one primary and the second intermediate, grades four through six. Her panic rested in the fact that the person originally contracted to work with the intermediate teachers canceled suddenly. I was invited to take her place.

“I’m not sure I know the specific program you want me to teach the teachers. It seems a bit dishonest to portray myself as an expert in any one program,” I suggested, hoping she would withdraw her offer. “You know how I feel about programs.” She’d taken enough coursework with me to know that I prefer teaching ideas and strategies rooted in teacher reflection and cultural responsiveness (Au, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Further, my commitment to the idea that teaching is relational work composed of the very specific identities of those involved in the pedagogical discourse made it impossible to recommend any particular program.

“I know all that,” came her desperate reply. “I know you. But we’re using a set of books that teachers will read, not simply a boxed program from some publisher. You’d like these books. We’d let you do what you want, as long as you have them read and think about some of the ideas in the books. I can get you the books by tomorrow.”

I decided I was not going to do it. I was exhausted as we neared the end of a National Writing Project summer institute that I directed and planned a nice long break, in my backyard, reading, and maybe driving to San Diego to read more at the beach once the work was over. After listening to her pleas and thinking about the intensity of a weeklong workshop (a forum I’d grown to appreciate), I relented.

There was a deeper reason for my hesitancy in doing the workshop. Since the beginning of the tyranny when No Child Left Behind became law, I had been witness to teacher trainings. During these sessions, teachers were treated as ignorant and in need of close and frequent supervision and monitoring (Allington, 2004). Further, they were treated as being incapable of thinking for themselves and needing carefully scripted lesson plans. ‘Professional development’ involved training teachers to read these scripts. They also needed to be trained in the administration of tests that were composed of utter nonsense, including nonsense words and nonsense activities (Goodman, 2006). During these trainings, teachers were not allowed to ask questions. Following Allington and Woodside-Jiron’s (1998) lead, when I was a guest during one of these sessions and heard the trainer, for at least the twentieth time, begin, “And the research says . . .” I raised my hand and did not wait to be called on. “What research?” I asked. “I’m a researcher and want to read the work that you’re basing this on.”

“There’s plenty of research,” she responded, rather sternly.
“Yes, I’m sure you believe that,” I answered. “But I do research for a living and I’m not sure to which work you are referring. Could you please specify?”

“Well, citing the research is not part of our presentation today. We’ll have to put that in the parking lot. But you could read the report of the National Reading Panel (2000). However, as I said, we’ll have to put that in the parking lot for now.”

“I understand,” I said. “But just so you know, the Report of the National Reading Panel is not a research study. It is a carefully crafted document to support certain people and marginalize others . . . like me.” I sat down.

In the ‘parking lot’ strategy, the presenter puts up a large sheet of paper at the beginning of her training. She explains the goals of the day and summarizes the agenda, telling the audience (NOT participants because there will be very little participation) when they’ll get to use the restroom, eat lunch, and the topics to be presented. She points to the large piece of paper and explains that there may be questions as she presents. These are to be written on sticky notes and placed in the parking lot. They will be addressed later in the day. But they never are. The parking lot is actually detention for teacher thinking and questions. It is an immediate response to any action that might derail the very standardized training. It shuts teachers up, placing their thinking not in a parking lot but in a cemetery. They are taught, above all else, that being trained and, in turn, training students, is about compliance (Altwerger, 2005).

I had one week to plan the weeklong workshop. I read the books that the teachers would receive, and integrated some reference to them in each day’s plans. I decided that we needed a theme for our work together and the need for this umbrella theme haunted me each day as I worked to compose a mix of theory, conversation, activity, and reflection on activity. I wanted them to have time to plan for the coming year, interrogate those plans, and engage in reflective professional dialogue. A week before that first day, the enrollment was 20, six days before it was up to 30, and by the Friday before the Monday that we started, we’d been moved to a larger room with a microphone system, a screen at each end of the room and 75 registrants. Originally, we were going to begin with some community building, which we’d still do, but it would be far from cozy as I gave up the idea of knowing all the participants as intimately as I’d planned. On Friday, panic set in and still the idea of a theme kept coming up in my mind.

How, I wondered, do I face 75 teachers and explain my truths to them? My truths about the pain and sadness that I see in the eyes of children and their teachers when I visit classrooms. Seasoned teachers tell me of their plans to retire as soon as they possibly can, and many do. Kozol (2007) has seen the same thing in schools:

When I’m taking notes during a visit to a school and children in a class divert themselves with tiny episodes of silliness, or brief epiphanies of tenderness to one another, or a whispered observation about something
they find amusing—like a goofy face made by another child in the class—I put a little round face with a smile on the margin of my notepad so that I won’t miss it later on. In all the 15 pages that I wrote during my visit in this classroom in the Bronx, there is not a single small round smiling face.

[...] I couldn’t find a single statement made by any child that had not been prompted by the teacher’s questions, other than one child’s timid question about which ‘objective’ should be written on the first line of a page the class had been asked to write. I found some notes on the children moving from their tables to their ‘centers’ and on various hand gestures they would make as a response to the hand gestures of their teachers. But I found no references to any child’s traits of personality or even physical appearance. Differences between the children somehow ceased to matter much during the time that I observed the class. The uniform activities and teacher’s words controlled my own experience perhaps as much as they controlled and muted the expressiveness of children.

Before I left the school, I studied again the definition of ‘Authentic Writing’ that was posted in the corridor. Whatever it was, according to the poster, it was ‘driven by curriculum . . .’ Authenticity was what somebody outside of this building, more authoritative than the children or their teachers, said it should be.

(pp. 623–624)

The weekend before we were to start the workshop, I began again, knowing that there would be ten tables of at least seven teachers each. I decided we’d begin with a strategy called what’s on your mind? that we used in the Writing Project summer institute. Participants would begin by writing as a way of bridging from the outside world and all their obligations, responsibilities, worries, and joys, and move to the inside world of the workshop. They’d write, share their writing at their tables, and I’d talk about the importance of starting each day of this week with their lives, their interests, and their professional and personal thinking.

On Monday morning, the first day of the workshop, I faced 75 teachers, turned off the music that I played over the loudspeaker system, and turned on the microphone. “Good morning,” I began. A few teachers answered and I smiled; a few people laughed. As I prepared to introduce our first strategy (What’s on your mind?), already thinking ahead to the theoretical connections I planned to discuss following our engagement, a serendipitous flash of insight finally arrived. In all of the mixed messages, threats, trainings, staff developments and other required duties in a teacher’s life, the idea of honesty seemed to have taken a back seat, if not entirely dismissed. Our theme would be honesty and, as I set aside my notes for the morning, I looked around the rectangular room at all the unfamiliar faces. “Why,” I began, “don’t we tell children the
truth about what we’re doing in school? Why don’t we let children tell their truths in school?” I remember those lines almost exactly as I spoke them because in a few minutes we were writing what was on our minds and I wrote what I’d said to begin our week together. “Why do we tell children directly or indirectly that they must leave their thinking, desires, ideas, fears, interests, cultures, and even home languages at the door? What would happen if we embraced those things?” And then I shuffled through my PowerPoint slides to find a cartoon from a Sunday paper that shows a little girl sitting on her couch watching TV. The announcer says, “And that’s the news from around the world . . . goodnight.” The next frame shows the girl using the remote to turn off the TV and the room is darkened. In the final frame, the child sits with her knees up to her chin in the now dark room; her face is both sad and frightened as her large eyes gaze straight ahead.

I say,

Our students are living in a complex world. They have things that frighten them, thrill them, and every emotion in between, but we are increasingly forced to ignore these things because we have things we must teach. I can’t do that anymore. I have to be honest with children and with you and I hope you (and perhaps your students when you’re back in school) can be honest. You don’t have to agree with me. There are no grades given out this week [some people laugh]. But the theme for this week is that we work on being honest with children and each other and allow our students to bring into our classrooms everything that is in their economic, social, political, linguistic, and cultural suitcases. Not for the entire day. Just find one place in the day or week—a microspace—where they can be honest and tell the truths of their lives as they understand them.

I show this quote:

I came to kindergarten so excited and ready to learn. I came prepared with my maleta (suitcase) full of so many wonderful things, my Spanish language, my beautiful culture, and many other treasures. When I got there, though, not only did they not let me use anything from my maleta, they did not even let me bring it into the classroom.

(Gutiérrez & Larson, 1994, p. 33)

“We’re going to begin with what’s on your mind. Everyday when you arrive, we get to spend twenty minutes writing, drawing from what is in your suitcase, with no interruptions. The only things that you need to know about what’s on your mind are: Be honest and be willing to share what you write with the whole group or your table. Just tell your truths. We’ll live this strategy and other strategies, then you make the connections to your own practice. Let’s write.”
It’s really quiet and we write. And after 20 minutes, five people want to share with the whole group. Some are funny and some are serious and then the others share at their tables. “One more thing,” I suggest to them, “just say ‘thank you’ to the person that shared and go on to the next person. Save conversation until everyone has shared.”

During our week together, we study: the reading process (Goodman, 1996; Weaver, 2002), writing, grand conversations (Peterson & Eeds, 1990), and more. But the main focus of our work is that our lives matter and we need a place where we can bring our lives to celebrate, interrogate, study, and share them. One day I read Fox (Wild & Brooks, 2000), the story of three friends, betrayal, and the lingering question of whether or not we can forgive those we love when they stretch the limits of our relationship beyond what we formerly found acceptable. They ask that I read certain pages again, show certain pictures again, and talk, laugh, and even cry about the memories and relationships the book conjures up. The teachers suggest the book is not just about friendship, but is also about love, trust, and forgiveness. Some make metaphorical connections to teaching, curriculum, and professional decision-making as they reveal feelings of being betrayed by constantly changing district demands. This conversation helps frame umbrella questions:

How can we live, for ourselves, the literacy life we truly want to live?

How can we support children in doing that?

What is school really and truly for?

I return to these questions regularly during the week. And then it is Friday and our week is over. We spend the last hour of the workshop building a geodesic dome with four foot long pieces of wood, covering it with paper, and drawing out the metaphors of what it means to build something with children: a community, a literate environment, a safe place to think, a safe place to read and write, a safe place to ask questions, and a safe place to honestly interrogate the realities in which we live (Lewison et al., 2002). As I am packing up, in between hugs goodbye and well wishes, a group of teachers approaches me and suggests that the work cannot end here. It is with that request for more that the story of this book begins. Originally, we were going to site a course at these teachers’ school (for university credit), but political factors at different school sites made that impossible. We did have a class, open to any teachers in the district, at a more central location. We thought we might have a study group at the school just for the teachers there, but teachers were too busy and could not commit to a weekly or even monthly meeting. The continuing of the summer work eventually came down to the graduate class and, on a more intense level, two teachers at one school that wanted me to visit regularly.

Barbara, the teacher that suggested that the work could not end with a one-week workshop, did not want to take a class. She had only one year (the coming
school year) left to teach before she would retire after more than 20 years of teaching. She wanted help in her classroom; she wanted to know what it meant to live with and from children’s honest truths for at least part of the day for each day of the school year. My initial response to her was that it “depends on you and the children. It depends on what comes together, who walks through the door, what they have in their maletas, what you have in yours, how honest you are willing to be, how much time you are willing to devote.” I stopped there because I thought I was scaring her, but I wasn’t.

“So come to my classroom and let’s see what happens,” she said. Barbara, a white teacher, at Mesa Vista Elementary School who felt like, “I still don’t have it. I still don’t know how to teach like this and it seems so important.” During the first semester of the 2006–2007 school year, I visited every Thursday because I arranged to offer the course to the entire district at the district’s teacher center on that day. I visited for the day and then drove to the teacher center to teach a class to 18 teachers from six different schools. I spent Thursday mornings in Barbara’s class during her literacy time, including having lunch together. During those lunch sessions, we discussed what we saw and did and made decisions about what to do next. A second teacher, Patia, took the graduate class and joined us for lunch. Patia was beginning her ninth year of teaching. She decided to become a teacher after her children were grown up. Some of her family is from Mexico and she was born and raised in Texas, speaking Spanish in her home during her childhood. I went into Patia’s classroom in the afternoons, visiting those two classrooms weekly. Having taught young children for almost twenty years, I certainly understood teaching as a private—almost intimate—act, one that many teachers did not want others to witness. But Barbara and Patia were open to my weekly visits, open to arguing with me and sharing ideas and thinking, open to questioning me and each other and the administration, and, most importantly, open to the maletas that their students brought to school with them.

One afternoon early in the school year as the children boarded buses to leave for home and after school programs, Barbara said to me, “I want to do something this year that the children will remember for the rest of their lives. I know I have to do the math program and the reading program in the afternoon, but there has to be something that is big and important.”

“There is,” I said.
“What is it?” she asked.
“I don’t know. We have to listen and see.”

Then I suggested that my not knowing and her not knowing were essential to our work together because we cannot know without knowing the children and their understanding of what is true for them. That’s what I meant by honoring their maletas, by being honest, and by searching with them for what it is that matters to them. And we found a lot: sensitive, strong, and perceptive children who understood issues of language, culture, the border between the US and Mexico, economics, and what teachers need to know. In March, we were joined
by a third teacher, Roberta, who traveled between all of the classrooms in the school; she was hired to help with the teaching of writing and we were fortunate to have her in Barbara’s and Patia’s classrooms on the days when I was at the school. Roberta was a student in the language arts methods class I taught the previous school year. She graduated as an elementary education major with a bilingual endorsement in Spanish. This book is about what we all learned together—the children, their teachers, their families to some degree, and me.

**Portraits and Counterportraits**

I rely upon the qualitative method of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) in this book because that method is a good tool for representing the multiple layers of interactions that occurred in the two classrooms while, at the same time, also demanding consideration of the subtleties of the various contexts that influence those interactions. However, my intent is not to present the portraits of the children and teachers at Mesa Vista Elementary School at one moment in time, suggestive of a group sitting for a photographer’s or painter’s portrait. The portraits in this book are more consistent with a portrait presented in a book or movie. Rather than a single moment, I present multiple moments and interpretations of those moments. I present the settings, actors, actions, and language use, both oral and written. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe portraiture this way:

> As the researcher documents the context—rich with detailed description, anticipatory themes and metaphors, and allusions to history and evolution—she must remember that the context is not static and that the actors are not only shaped by the context, but that they also give it shape. The portraitist, then, must be vigilant in recording changes in the context, some as visible and anticipatable as the shifting seasons . . . [o]ther changes in context are far more subtle.

(p. 57)

It is the organic and constantly changing nature of portraiture that drew me to it as a research tool (see Appendix 1). A portrait is not case studies stacked up next to each other with a subsequent cross-case analysis. It is, instead, constant attention to multiple contexts (school, district, state, etc.) and the individuals and sub groupings within them, consistent with the complexity of life in a classroom (Peterson, 1992).

In this study, portraits are interpreted from multiple perspectives, consistent with critical literacy (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2007). From one perspective, the children, teachers, and communities in and around Mesa Vista Elementary School (MVE) are already portrayed in certain ways, in certain official capacities. Later in this chapter, I present components of the official portrait
using the data from various local, state, and national agencies, such as the public education department, the United States Census, and the Bureau of Educational Statistics in Washington DC. This (institutional) official portrait is the one that some consider ‘objective,’ suggesting a deeply complex hermeneutic conundrum because this ‘objective data’ is presented to the public via the media and official reports as the honest and only truthful portrait of this school. In reality, the official portrait is a homogenized blend of data (also very political) that oversimplifies portraiture. Other data, using multiple perspectives and a variety of literatures, yield different portraits that are more thickly descriptive (Geertz, 1973) and unique. Since the portraits that emerge from the palette of multiple literatures and other data (e.g. children’s writing rather than criterion referenced test scores) contrast so deeply with the official portrait, and not being drawn to the idea of only using ‘unofficial’ because of the less-than-legitimate connotation that the term carries, I use the term counterportraits. Counterportraits are composed through narratives, writing, interactions, and settings (contexts) and are supported by field notes and counterliteratures that consider identity, subjectivity, race, languages, interaction, and more. Counterportraits are political acts of defiance and struggle with the ultimate goal of recrafting the official portrait so that it is more robust, inclusive, and comprehensive.

The official portrait marginalizes, disenfranchises, minimalizes, and dismisses many diverse children’s lives, relying upon statistical representations of large groups of students, teachers, and schools. Such work is useful and important, but when it becomes a weapon to hurt children and teachers, it takes on a political charge. Counterportraits consider the unique stories that may be used to provide specificity, in contrast to the broad strokes that statistics paint. Halliday’s (1978) work on context of situation and Goffman’s work (1959; 1961) influenced these analyses. Halliday discusses context of situation as composed of field, tenor, and mode. The field, in this case, two classrooms, is the institutional setting in which language happens. The tenor is the nature of the relationships between the interlocutors and mode is the type of language used, which means oral and written and the various tools through which those are expressed (on a computer, with chalk, etc.).

Understanding the layers of field, tenor and mode in classroom situations offered insights into what children chose to present and what they did not. Within school, students suppress some of who they are and where they are from. They are taught to do this in a number of ways as they make their way through school. Goffman (1959) discusses what people present to each other and what they suppress in their interactions with others. In daily interactions:

each participant is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable. The maintenance of this surface agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant
concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present feels obliged to give lip service . . . . Together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored . . . . I will refer to this level of agreement as a ‘working consensus.’

(pp. 9–10)

Goffman writes that this working consensus results in a certain degree of harmony, though he concedes that it is idealistic to think of this as much more than a somewhat superficial construct that allows for the interactions within a context to occur. Coupled with Bloome’s work on procedural display (1983) in which students and teachers strive to continue a lesson at hand even when the students do not understand the concepts being taught and Mehan’s work on recitation scripts in lessons (1982), the emerging sense of what occurs in many classrooms, when viewed as sites of social and cognitive interaction, is that there is often little room for honesty in school during the time when the official curriculum (Dyson, 1997) is being delivered. All the players in the classroom, when it is viewed as a dramatic setting, are involved in the unfolding script. Script, in the sense that Goffman uses it, is composed at the site of interaction and responsive to the possibilities that the norms within that context typically allow. Goffman’s scripts are malleable, reflective of relationships that may change. His idea of scripts is not to be confused with the artificial script of a scripted reading or writing program, which is much more severely limited and demands little or no teacher thinking. Goffman’s script is composed at the point of interaction, but has points of origin in the group’s (classroom participants’) histories together and multiple combinations of their subjectivities across settings. The teachers and I worked to rewrite the possibilities of this script by engaging the students as writers and thinkers who took on the task of bringing the unofficial (and previously unconsidered) into the classroom as the work of school.

Goffman (1959), perhaps foreshadowing the present work on critical literacy in classrooms, wrote, “Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way” (p. 13). He suggests that the power dynamics within interactional settings are rooted in a group’s understanding of, and expectations for, what can unfold within a given setting. Although he does not untangle the political knots inherent in such a statement, he does recognize that when disruptions take place, all the players vie for new positions as the focus of power may seem vulnerable. Typically, he notes, those in power are not as vulnerable as some of the players would like, as the dominant force moves in swiftly to restore the old order. During “disruptive events . . . the interaction itself may come to a confused and embarrassing halt” (p. 12).