

Our Conversation with You about “Teaching Kids to Think”



Andrea S. Libresco

Jeannette Balantic

When putting together this issue on thinking, we couldn't help remembering a cartoon in which a teacher at the front of the class tells his students, “I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers ... who will do exactly as I say!”

In an age of “Race to the Top,” it can often feel as though there is little time to provide opportunities for children to think and, even if one is inclined to make time, the current emphasis on testing does not tend to reward teachers who prioritize student thinking. Even before the last decade's emphasis on testing, there have been those who believe that primary students are too young to engage in critical thinking. In fact, at a local school board meeting that one of us attended, one of the board members rebelled against posing essential questions¹ to fourth graders, because “you're asking them to think, and they can't really do that yet.”

As the articles in this issue reveal, young children are capable of thinking when teachers create the conditions for such thinking—at a variety of grade levels and with a range of subject matter.

In “How Service-Learning Can Ignite Thinking,” **Stephanie Serriere, Lori McGarry, David Fuentes, and Dana Mitra** demonstrate that first and second graders can think locally, globally, and empathetically, while connecting with their local homeless population.

Mark Baidon and Rindi Baidon's piece, “Evaluating Online Sources: Helping Students Determine Trustworthiness, Readability, and Usefulness,” highlights the thinking of fourth graders in Singapore as they and their teacher identify specific strategies they can use to determine the value of a variety of sources of information.

Bronwyn Cole and Margit McGuire's article, “Real-World Problems: Engaging Young Learners in Critical Thinking,” illustrates that first graders can grapple with issues that could develop in their neighborhood if they come together, consider evidence, deliberate, and contribute thoughtfully to the discussion.

The Pullout “Handouts for Engaging Young Learners in Critical Thinking” provides teaching materials to accompany the article by **Bronwyn Cole and Margit McGuire**.

In “Occupy Wall Street: Examining a Current Event as It

Happens” by **Elizabeth Bellows, Michele Bauml, Sherry Field, and Mary Ledbetter**, fifth grade students think about current events, analyzing reports about the “Occupy” movement at the local and national levels, as well as discussing the movement's connections to our constitutional rights.

Barbara Torre Veltri's piece, “Educator Abroad: Teaching (*Insegnare*) and Learning (*Imparare*) with Italian Children,” shows that the thinking of pre-school children in Italy can be quite sophisticated. She observed how youngsters can think like economists, lawyers, strategists, pragmatists, and global citizens—as well as think and act like kids.

All of these articles provide examples of upper-level thinking by students; equally important, they provide example of elementary teachers who scaffold students' thinking. **Marilynne Boyle-Baise's** “Teachers-as-Researchers: Following Your Puzzlements,” reminds us that it's not only student thinking that must be nurtured in elementary schools. Boyle-Baise, recipient of the 2011 Jean Dresden Grambs Distinguished Career Research in Social Studies Award from NCSS, promotes the importance of thinking by teachers as we conduct research in our own classrooms to resolve questions we have about teaching and learning.

Alan Singer and Cecilia Goodman's book review, “Let's Tell It Right: Historical Inaccuracies in a Story of Lincoln and Douglass,” reminds us, elementary teachers and students alike, to examine critically the history portrayed in the literature that we read, so that we can get a more accurate representation of our world, past and present.



In the book *How We Think*, John Dewey reminds us, “The native and unspoiled attitude of childhood, marked by ardent curiosity, fertile imagination, and love of experimental inquiry, is near, very near, to the attitude of the scientific mind.”² Clearly, one of the major challenges for teachers of elementary social studies is to create the conditions that allow children to explore their world, investigate a variety of positions, experiment with different perspectives, and try on ideas. Creating these conditions is no easy feat when the pressure to cover mandated

Regie Routman to Address 92ND NCSS Annual Conference



material in other disciplines may be fierce, and assessments that rely on multiple-choice questions may trump those that require deep thinking. Nevertheless, as educational philosopher Nel Noddings asks, “How can we claim to educate our students if they do not acquire the intellectual habits of mind associated with thinking?”³

We think that Noddings’ question and the ones below are worthy of discussion:

- Can very young learners engage in critical thinking? If so, how?
- How important is it to engage students in analyzing the reliability of sources?
- To what extent do you promote critical thinking in your students through studying current events? Through service learning?
- What gets in the way of providing students with opportunities to think critically? How do you work around those obstacles?
- To what extent does the Common Core support student thinking in social studies?
- Do you get opportunities to observe your own students’ thinking? How do you arrange this? What new perspectives do these observations provide?
- Do you ever research your own teaching? If so, to what extent do you plan activities that support your students’ thinking?

We look forward to a thoughtful conversation around the topic of “supporting students’ thinking” at the social network site Connected.socialstudies.org. Please join us! —Andrea and Jeannette

Notes

1. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998).
2. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1910), iii.
3. Nel Noddings, “All Our Students Thinking,” *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 5 (2008): 8-13.

Teacher, author, and literacy specialist **Regie Routman** will address the 92ND NCSS Annual Conference, which will be held in Seattle, Washington, November 16–18, 2012. Regie’s intimate knowledge of teaching and learning, down-to-earth style, and dedication to children’s success have made her one of the most vibrant and respected names in literacy education. Her many books and resources encourage teachers to take charge their professional learning and create effective, efficient, and joyful practices. Currently she is focusing on teachers’ professional development and school-wide achievement. An outgrowth of her residency work, primarily in high-needs schools with underserved students, has been to organize a national conference on Urgency and School Change; the first was held in March 2011 in Seattle, and the second is planned for 2013 (www.regieroutman.com).

Regie’s teaching experience of more than 40 years includes being an elementary school teacher, a reading specialist, a learning disabilities tutor, a Reading Recovery teacher, a language arts resource and mentor teacher, a staff developer, and a literacy coach. Her books are widely acclaimed as providing a solid, research-based understanding of language learning along with a wealth of practical ideas and annotated resources. Read more about the upcoming NCSS Annual Conference (and check out highlights from 2011) at www.socialstudies.org/conference