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Saving Black Mountain: The promise of critical literacy in a multicultural democracy

*Students learned that their
spoken and written
words had the power
to influence others.*

We live in an era where multinational corporations wield unprecedented power; where special interest groups largely determine state and national political and economic agendas; where the gap between the rich and poor has reached dangerous proportions; and where what goes on in schools is often determined not by parents or educators, but by corporate interests. When popular power diminishes, then so does democracy.

What is the connection between democracy, literacy, and power? What can teachers do to challenge current inequities that exist between rich and poor, white and black, men and women? In this article, we explore answers to these questions by presenting a project undertaken by fourth graders in Kentucky that has aptly been called "Saving Black Mountain." The students who were involved in this project reside in a small U.S. community that is adjacent to Lexington, the second largest city in the state of Kentucky. The issues facing these students are very different from those of their Appalachian peers, yet these central Kentucky students chose to join forces with students from the mountainous region of eastern Kentucky to save the highest peak in the state from destruction by strip mining. In the process, the students learned a great deal about the hardships of their fellow citizens from Appalachia. They also learned that in a democratic society, their voices can make a difference.

To provide a theoretical framework for examining this project, we begin by exploring the concept of "democracy" and what it means in a multicultural society. Next, we outline several assumptions of critical literacy and suggest that it is important in realizing a strong democracy. We then show how the Saving Black Mountain project exemplifies critical literacy in action.

Linking democracy, equity, and literacy instruction

As educators, we are not accustomed to thinking of literacy instruction as having democratic aims. Rather, literacy is typically associated with economic aims—with producing efficient and productive workers who can help to maintain a nation's competitive edge. On a systematic and regular basis, we are bombarded with messages about the inadequacy of public education in general, and literacy instruction in particular. Recent controversies that dichotomize various instructional methodologies (e.g., whole language versus phonics, literature-based versus skills-based) and legislative decisions in several states to return to a "phonics only" instructional model are reflections of a larger political and social debate, a debate that involves who has the power to determine what gets taught in schools, how it gets taught, and even what constitutes literate behavior. Questions that focus solely on methodology (i.e., which methods will lead to the highest lev-

els of student achievement) largely ignore issues of power and how that power works in society to enable and to oppress.

Democracy literally means power of the people. In a democratic system the populace—not special interest groups or the wealthier members of society—has the authority to govern. In an ideal democratic society, there is no aristocracy, but rather “an aristocracy of everyone” (Barber, 1992). Elsewhere, Barber (1984) contrasted a “thin” or representative form of democracy with a strong, participatory form. In strong democracies, people are directly involved in the decision-making process. (See also Arblaster, 1987; Sehr, 1997; Wood, 1988.)

Equity is consistent with a strong democratic system. In other words, the struggle for equity is a struggle to give “power to the people”—not just some people, but all people. In a multicultural society, realizing the goal of equity would mean that everyone had a voice—persons of color, the poor, and others who historically have been underrepresented. Note that equity does not mean the realization of individual personal interests; rather, it means that every person will have an integral role in determining what is best for the common good. A strong democracy that is grounded in equity involves mutual inquiry, collaboration, and compromise.

What role does literacy play in a strong, equitable, democratic system? In addressing this question, it's important to acknowledge that literacy is a social process. That is, it involves communication with others across time and space. In a strong democratic system, oral and written communication are essential. John Dewey, the famous American educational philosopher, conceived of democracy as a form of “associated living.” Democracy would be at risk, he argued, when there was divisiveness in society, as when groups failed to interact with one another. In characterizing Dewey's ideas about democracy, Noddings (1995) wrote,

Do people communicate freely across the lines of class, religion, race, and region? Whenever groups withdraw from connection, isolate themselves, and become exclusive, democracy is endangered... an isolationist society has by its very isolation risked its status as a democracy because it has lost “free points of contact” and opportunities to inquire beyond its own borders. (p. 35)

Dewey also argued that democracy is a process; that is, it is not a static type of governance, but

rather involves the continuous formation of community. Thus, democracy is never stagnant or complete, but it is always “in the making.” Thus, contrary to popular opinion, which suggests that a democratic community can be forged only through conformity of ideas (e.g., E.D. Hirsch's approach in his infamous 1988 theory of “cultural literacy”), Dewey maintained that democracy depends upon collaborative inquiry to arrive at mutual aims—aims that benefit the whole community rather than a select few.

Establishing mutual aims requires that we talk to one another, truly listen to others' perspectives, and value the opinions of those who are different from us. Thus, as Powell (1992, 1999) has argued, literacy instruction in a democracy ought to help students to communicate effectively with all persons in a multicultural society and to see the value of literacy for their own lives and for social, political, and economic transformation. We would argue that a democratic agenda requires a critical literacy—one that acknowledges the differentials of power in society and seeks to realize a more equitable, just, and compassionate community. It is to this topic that we now turn.

Conceptualizing a critical literacy

In recent years, whole language pedagogy has emerged as a means not only for literacy instruction, but also for individual empowerment (Edelsky, 1991). Critical literacy moves beyond holistic theory in that it confronts societal issues of power and dominance head on. A primary goal of critical pedagogy is to promote democracy by working toward a more just and equitable society.

We suggest that there are three basic underlying assumptions of critical literacy. First, critical literacy assumes that the teaching of literacy is never neutral but always embraces a particular ideology or perspective. Second, critical literacy supports a strong democratic system grounded in equity and shared decision making. Third, critical literacy assumes that literacy instruction can empower and lead to transformative action. We shall examine each of these assumptions.

Assumption 1: Literacy instruction can never be neutral. The teaching of literacy requires that we make certain decisions about what is taught and how it is taught. Critical theorists have argued that these decisions are not neutral but are based upon our perceptions of what constitutes

literate behavior in a given social context. For instance, schools historically have reinforced the standards of those who have the power to define appropriate language use. Hence, the “hillbilly” discourse of eastern Kentucky and the black vernacular of students of color are deemed inadequate (and even deficient) within the educational institution, despite the fact that both are systematic and highly complex linguistic forms. Similarly, our choice of texts is a political decision, and despite recent trends popularizing multicultural literature, many of our textbooks remain largely monocultural and present what Banks (1995) referred to as “mainstream academic knowledge” (p. 394). Hence, the cultural knowledge of students of color and other underrepresented groups becomes relegated to the margins of what is considered “essential knowledge.”

Beyond this, however, critical theorists would argue that how we teach literacy is also problematic. Traditional instructional approaches define literacy as a series of discrete skills that can be codified and transmitted to students. When students master these skills, they are deemed “literate.” This model of literacy assumes that knowledge is “culture free” and that it can be constructed by those outside the world of the classroom. Skills-based instruction presumably removes literacy from its social and cultural contexts by presenting it as a mere tool for transmitting seemingly objective information. Thus, rather than using written language to promote creative and critical thought, literacy instruction becomes reduced to providing ritualized, mechanical responses or to producing the “right” answer in response to predetermined questions (Shannon, 1990). Thus, knowledge acquisition is controlled through both the content and structure of the curriculum materials.

Absent in such models is an acknowledgment that literacy is both a social and a cultural phenomenon. That is, it is created and used in social contexts to communicate with others—to express our ideas, to share our stories, to give us a voice. In contrast, the literacy of school often controls, marginalizes, and silences. Giroux (1992) wrote that

Dominant approaches to reading limit the possibilities for students to mobilize their own voices in relation to particular texts. In its dominant form, literacy is constructed in monolithic rather than pluralistic terms. Literacy becomes a matter

of mastering either technical skills, information, or an elite notion of the canon. (p. 307)

Holistic approaches to literacy instruction validate the social and cultural nature of literacy by focusing on authentic uses of written language and by insisting that children read and write for real purposes and real audiences (Edelsky, 1991). A critical view of literacy takes holistic teaching into the political domain by assuming that no knowledge is neutral but is always based upon someone’s perception of reality, someone’s perspective of what is important to know (Apple, 1993; Edelsky, 1999; Powell, 1999). Hence, critical teachers view texts as artifacts to be deconstructed in order to determine their underlying assumptions and hidden biases. What are the relations of power that are embedded in the text? What images are being promoted in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic class? Whose interests are being served by this text, and whose are being marginalized? Taking a critical stance requires that we address issues of equity; thus, questions such as these become prominent in classrooms that promote a critical literacy.

Assumption 2: Critical literacy is consistent with a strong democratic system. As we indicated earlier, a strong democracy requires equity or shared decision-making power. Thus, a critical literacy promotes democracy by challenging inequities in society. Students learn how power works to promote particular interests over others, such as by denigrating the cultural knowledge, language, and experiences of subdominant populations while simultaneously elevating the status of dominant cultural knowledge, language, and experiences. These messages of inferiority and superiority are subtle yet powerful, and they become part of our taken-for-granted assumptions about the world.

A critical literacy helps students to unlock the hidden cultural assumptions and biases of texts. For instance, Australian educator Jennifer O’Brien had her 5- to 7-year-olds read junk mail critically by asking them to consider who benefits from Mother’s Day advertisements (Luke, O’Brien, & Comber, 1994). The children compared the images of the mothers in the catalogues to “real” mothers and, contrary to the characteristics of many of their mothers, they found that most of the women in the catalogues

were young, Anglo Australian, and pretty. The children also conducted a student survey on their mothers' gift preferences and found that mothers actually desired many things for Mother's Day that were not represented in the catalogues, such as leisure time, appreciation, and "peace and quiet," as well as items like tickets to the movies and photographs. Through their activities, the children were asked to take a critical stance toward the messages found in popular texts.

Critical literacy also promotes a strong democracy in that students are encouraged to consider all sides of an issue in the decision-making process, including views of persons whose perspectives traditionally have been marginalized or even silenced in schools and in society. The "transformative knowledge" of marginalized populations is given prominence in the curriculum, as students read and hear about the experiences and practices of historically underrepresented groups (Banks, 1995, 1997). Students become engaged in writing, sharing, and discussing stories and information that have relevance in their everyday lives. They explore current social issues and address problems in their community, "giving voice to the voiceless" (McElroy-Johnson, 1993) as they read and listen to the narratives of persons whose experiences differ from their own. In this way, critical literacy becomes "real-world" literacy that is truly functional—students are asked to read "the world" in addition to "reading the word" (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Assumption 3: Literacy instruction can empower and lead to transformative action. Contrary to skills-based models that assume literacy instruction can be neutral, critical literacy is "consciously political" in that it intentionally promotes the basic tenets of democracy: freedom, justice, equality. Students are encouraged not merely to engage in a critical reading of a text, but also to take action. So, for instance, Australian educator Barbara Comber (1999) told about a primary teacher who involved her students in a study of the low number of trees in their community. Because trees are a commodity in South Australia, they are found more frequently in the affluent suburbs, and therefore can be considered a marker of one's socioeconomic status. As a result of their study, the students became involved with an urban renewal project in their area. They invited key government person-

nel to come to their school to respond to their questions and developed and mailed their own design to the people in charge of the project.

Similarly, students in Bob Peterson's fifth-grade class investigated Native American stereotypes in their school's books and classrooms. Subsequently, they decided to take action by teaching first graders about what they had found (Peterson, 1994). The students in Maria Sweeney's fourth-grade class chose to write and perform a play about apartheid after viewing a film on the subject. Sweeney (1999) wrote about similar projects done with students that led to social action: posters that were hung around the school and in store windows condemning racism, sexism, ageism, and classism; and picture books her students created for the school library that told the alternative view of Columbus's "discovery" of America.

Critical literacy goes beyond providing authentic purposes and audiences for reading and writing and considers the role of literacy in societal transformation. The students in these classrooms are learning a great deal more than how to read and write. They are also learning about the power of literacy—their literacy—to make a difference.

We shall now describe the project undertaken by fourth graders in Kentucky that illustrates the transformative potential of critical literacy. These children took a political stand and used their power as citizens to save a mountain from the destruction of strip mining.

Saving Black Mountain: A critical literacy project

They scrape off the mountain, fill the valleys below.
I can't drink my water, my well has sunk low.
The scars stretch across her, her face looks so sad.
The children are crying, the people are mad.

Song written by Jessamine County, Kentucky, students

The southern Appalachian region of the United States has been marked by both economic and cultural exploitation. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, southern Appalachia was discovered by outside capitalistic investors, who descended upon the region in the years after the Civil War and bought up mountain land for its rich coal and timber reserves (Eller, 1982). Often land was purchased through "broad form deeds," which gave

the mineral rights to speculators, leaving the surface land to be used for agricultural purposes.

Eventually many of the smaller land holdings became consolidated, and a few mining companies managed to gain a monopoly over the coal industry in the region. The coal barons also gained control of the local economic and political systems, establishing company towns and company stores where goods could be purchased only on credit or through company scrip. Between 1900 and 1930, over 600 such towns were established in the southern Appalachian region.

During World War I, with expanded production and increased profits, most operators left the company towns for a more comfortable life in the city. Many independent coal producers sold out to larger companies, leaving the coal fields in the hands of absentee owners who often had even less concern for the local residents. Dependence upon a single industry left the region subject to the fluctuations of the national economy, and with rising land prices, increasing taxes, and a more competitive market, local residents found that they could no longer sustain a self-sufficient agricultural economy.

Even today, mountain people in areas such as eastern Kentucky depend largely on the coal industry for their livelihoods. A survey conducted two decades ago of 80 counties in six Appalachian states revealed that 40% of the land and 70% of the mineral rights were owned by corporations (Beaver, 1983). The coal companies continue to wield tremendous power, and local residents have often had little input on how the land is to be used. Thus, while Appalachia has unlimited wealth in terms of natural resources, these resources have generally added to the coffers of a few individuals and corporations—many of whom do not even reside in the region—leaving Appalachia barren and its residents impoverished.

The struggle of the local population to gain control of their land and resources has been continuous and characterized by a number of grassroots movements and labor strikes. This struggle for local autonomy continues through the work of committed individuals and community action groups. For instance, residents gained a major victory in 1988 when a state constitutional amendment was passed that eliminated the coal industry's right to strip mine under the authority of broad form deeds without the landowner's permission. At the same time that eastern

Kentuckians have been fighting for their rights, however, the rest of the nation continues to see Appalachia as a region of ignorance and inferiority. That image reinforces the tendency to "blame the victims" for their own plight and therefore undermines a broader democratic response.

Even within the state of Kentucky, there is divisiveness between the mountainous region of eastern Kentucky, the urban areas of central and northern Kentucky, and the rural western part of the state. While there have been a few initiatives to break down the images and stereotypes associated with eastern Kentucky, school children typically know very little about persons from other parts of the state. Thus, students in Kentucky often have erroneous images of other populations within their own state and are largely ignorant of the issues and problems that those others face. This divisiveness hinders the development of mutual goals that are so critical to a democracy.

In 1998 that situation changed for the fourth-grade students at Rosenwald-Dunbar Elementary in Jessamine County, which is located in the bluegrass region of central Kentucky just south of Lexington. One of their teachers, Sandy Adams (third author), who is a firm believer in inquiry-based learning, asked her students to choose a project that interested them. The children had been learning about Black Mountain, the highest peak in Kentucky, in their social studies textbook. After Adams told them that the mountain was slated to be strip mined, the children decided that they wanted to learn more. Soon the entire fourth grade became involved, and the students were arranging field trips, interviewing miners, and working with eastern Kentucky activists to halt the destruction of Black Mountain.

Initially it was not the students' intention to save the mountain. Rather, consistent with responsible democratic inquiry, their purpose merely was to learn about the issue so that they might address it from a position of knowledge rather than ignorance. They took a critical stance, talking with those in the region who benefited from strip mining as well as those who opposed it. In those interviews, they discovered that many miners and their families depended upon coal mining for their livelihoods and thus supported the strip mining of "Big Black." Two students' comments illustrate their dilemma:

I guess we did go against strip mining, but we knew what the other people's perspective was. It's kind of a hard thing. You don't want to take those jobs away from the people....

You have to look at how the coal miners feel. When we were doing this project, we were always thinking of them and how they have to support their families.

At the same time, however, the students conducted research on the impact of strip mining on the natural environment, and their findings eventually led to their decision to fight to preserve the mountain.

At the time of the project, Jericol Mining Company had applied for a permit to expand its surface mining operations on Black Mountain. As part of the application process in Kentucky, companies are required to provide information on the environmental impact of their mining operations. Other groups are also permitted to submit petitions for consideration, at which point a public hearing is required prior to acting on the company's application. Further, while the application is being considered, mining is prohibited. Because of the unique habitat at higher elevations on the mountain, a petition had been filed by Kentuckians for the Commonwealth to declare elevations above 3,000 feet on Black Mountain unsuitable for mining. Hence, when the students visited the mountain, they were surprised to find that strip mining was occurring. They were also disturbed when they examined water samples from wells and streams and learned from local residents that their water sources had been contaminated.

The fourth graders then began what can only be considered an all-out fight to save Black Mountain. They decided to make a second trip there to gather more information for their project. They wrote to individuals to solicit funds to continue their campaign and subsequently collected thousands of dollars for the project. They alerted local newspapers and television stations and arranged for press conferences to talk about the mountain's future, and they even organized a "Hands Across the Mountain" rally with students from eastern Kentucky to raise public awareness. The Rosenwald-Dunbar students also wrote to the governor and to various state representatives to make their opposition known.

As part of their research, the students met with mining company officials in order to hear their perspective on the surface mining of Black

Mountain. During the meeting, the children presented their findings and asked the officials to respond to their report. Company representatives tried to dissuade the students by stating that the facts they were presenting were false. Their teacher tells what transpired as follows:

The Coal Council came here from Frankfort and the Office of Surface Mining came from Bell County. An official from the Coal Association more or less told a student that she had made up facts in front of all these kids. She was standing there after handing him her writing and he made it a point to say "these facts are not true." So she looked around the room for help, but when she had gathered her thoughts she said, "Well, I used your [Web] site for a source." He didn't say anything else. But they came in and presented their side. We thought that was only fair.

In October of 1998, the students submitted a proposal to the Director of Permits of the Department for Surface Reclamation and Enforcement, urging the Department to consider alternatives to strip mining. This 10-page proposal included an analysis of the problem, data on the unique plant and animal life on the mountain, a rationale for the students' suggestions, and five recommendations. The proposed recommendations reflect the students' awareness of the complexity of the issue and the need to consider economic as well as environmental concerns:

1. Choose another mountain or area that is not so special to the people. And, that is not such a big part of our history. There is coal everywhere in Kentucky, not just Black Mountain.
2. Do underground mining. It's not the easiest or cheapest way, but it will save most of the stuff on top, and you can still get the coal out.
3. If the coal companies... are still going to strip mine Black Mountain, just don't mine near the highest peak. That way, the animals and plants that need high elevation, some of them will still live, and at least that part of the mountain will still be elegant.
4. Ashland Incorporated should buy the land, and not let the coal companies mine it.
5. Kentucky could maybe buy the mountain and turn it into a state park. Then it would still be lovely, people could still enjoy it, and the plants and animals could still live. (Submitted by a fourth-grade student at Rosenwald-Dunbar Elementary School)

In early December of the same year, a group of fourth-grade students from Rosenwald-Dunbar joined eighth graders from Harlan

Students' purposeful literacy activities

Reading activities	Writing activities	Oral language activities	Instructional lessons
literary pieces related to the project	notetaking and documentation	storytelling sessions (e.g., Jack Tales)	brainstorming
feedback from readers (letters)	letters to the governor, state representatives, newspapers	presentations to various legislative committees	inquiry lessons (e.g., skimming, main ideas, supporting details)
research using books, articles, and Internet sources	response journals	presentations to Harlan County residents	in-class discussions based on information learned
various government documents	on-demand writing (writing prompts) tied to the project, to prepare for state test	presentations at colleges and universities	lessons on Kentucky government, citizenship, democracy, citizens' rights
newspaper articles/press releases on the project	writing in a variety of genres (e.g., personal narratives, articles, proposals, persuasive essays, reports)	presentations to/interviews with coal company representatives	lessons involving planning field trips, ceremonies, presentations
writing of other students	petitions and surveys	presentations to other students	formal reading lessons
legislature and mining company agreements	songs and poetry related to the project	interviews with Appalachian residents	lessons on effective writing in various genres
social studies textbook	statewide e-mails to students in other districts	interviews conducted by the news media (newspapers and television stations)	lessons on Appalachian culture (e.g., mountain music, quilting)

County in eastern Kentucky to present their findings to the legislature's joint committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources. With microphones in hand and with the aid of videotapes, transparencies, and posters that their classmates had created, the students spoke about the need to save Black Mountain. They urged the legislators to consider developing the mountain for tourism rather than for strip mining. One Harlan County student who argued for the economic benefits of tourism had a father who had been forced to quit his job as a miner because of illness. Another student, however, advocated for strip mining because he reasoned that preventing mining on Black Mountain could cause people

to be out of work. One representative wrote a letter in response to the students' presentation:

I was impressed by the presentation concerning mountaintop removal mining on Black Mountain. I am opposed to mountaintop removal on that particular mountain, and that is why I invited your group to appear before the Interim Agricultural and Natural Resources Environmental Committee.

I urge you to continue your efforts and to appear at the public hearing to be held sometime in late January 1999....

Largely as a result of the students' efforts, a compromise agreement was reached in May 1999 between coal operators and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth whereby 1,850 acres on Black Mountain would be saved from logging and strip mining. The agreement also called for a 18,915-

acre conservation area, with the state purchasing some of the timber and coal rights from the owners. Jericol Coal also agreed to make changes in existing strip mining permits and to develop a sediment control plan. In a subsequent newspaper article, teacher Sandy Adams was quoted as saying, "Who would have thought that kids could save a mountain?" (Rutledge, 1999).

Critical literacy in action

Consistent with a whole language perspective, it is clear that these fourth graders were involved in a number of authentic, purposeful literacy activities through their involvement in the Saving Black Mountain project. The Table summarizes the various activities in which the children were engaged.

All of the language arts strands included in the Kentucky Program of Studies were targeted: reading, writing, speaking, listening, observing, inquiring, and using technology. In addition, the project incorporated all of the fourth-grade social studies strands, including historical perspective of Kentucky, geography, economics, government and civics, and culture and society.

We would argue, however, that this project also exemplifies critical literacy in that the children learned about the transformative potential of literacy in a democratic society. As we outlined earlier, critical literacy involves confronting the non-neutrality of knowledge and texts (both spoken and written) and is consistent with a strong democratic system. The perspectives of historically marginalized groups are welcomed and alternative viewpoints are sought, as they are seen as necessary ingredients for informing the decision-making process. As with the Saving Black Mountain project, critical literacy often leads to social action as students begin to discover and internalize the problems of society, thereby leading to more transformative uses of written and oral language. Thus, critical literacy is real-world literacy in that it is integral to the discovery of societal inequities and subsequent action. For the students involved in this project, uncovering hidden agendas and learning about both sides of the issue were essential as they sought to understand the problems associated with Black Mountain. Consistent with a critical agenda, literacy also became an important avenue for realizing a strong democracy, one

where the voices of those with historically limited power are truly heard.

Earlier in this article, we presented the ideas of John Dewey, who suggested that democracy is a form of "associated living" that can be sustained only through the interaction of diverse populations. Through the Black Mountain project, students in central Kentucky collaborated with students and community activists from the eastern part of the state to realize a common goal: the saving of a mountain. In the process, they learned about the problems faced by the Appalachian population, whose history and experiences have resulted in lives that vary significantly from populations elsewhere in the state. For instance, the students learned about economic and environmental conditions that mountain people must endure daily as a result of corporate power: land erosion, contaminated water, black lung disease. By talking with families and environmental activists in the region, they also learned how the local people have fought back. Thus, rather than merely learning about Appalachia through seemingly neutral facts found in a textbook, these children personalized the experiences of their mountain neighbors, thereby reading the *world* as they learned to read the *word*.

Beyond this, however, these students learned that literacy can make a difference. For them, literacy has power. When asked in interviews what this project meant to them, the students had various responses:

I think it made us feel special. We were a part of what was happening, and we helped save a part of Kentucky.

We made a difference. We changed people's lives.

Writing, getting something published, or sending something to the government, you don't think you're going to do that. Once you start, you push yourself as far as you can go until you achieve what you are trying to achieve. And we really did.

The interviews quoted were held nearly a year later, while the students were in fifth grade, yet it was evident that the children still had a great deal of enthusiasm for the project. Shortly after the interviews took place, a group of these students traveled to Washington, D.C., to accept the youth environmental education award presented by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Perhaps the students who benefitted the most from the project were special-needs students who had struggled with reading and writ-

ing in the past. One such young man reported that before the project he was considered a "behavior problem," and he hated reading and writing. He told us that during the project, however, he never got in trouble; if his teacher gave him the choice of playing outside or writing for the project, he'd probably write. Another special-needs student was proud that, as the result of a letter he had written to a local professor, he was able to raise US\$500 for the project.

The Saving Black Mountain project shows what can be accomplished when we take seriously the importance of literacy for promoting democracy in a multicultural society. In reflecting about the project, an eastern Kentucky community activist (who wished to remain anonymous), told us that

The kids in Harlan County started the project to try to save Black Mountain from the devastating effects of mountaintop removal, but their efforts only gained mostly local attention. When the kids from central Kentucky joined in with their interest, their voices, their visits to inspect the potential destruction, the news media found it quite interesting that small "outsiders" cared enough to join the fight. . . . Those children came in here, and even they realized what these coal companies were about to do to our state's highest peak, so they went home and told their parents and everyone who would listen. Only then did the legislators from central Kentucky and the rest of the state take on the cause and join in the effort to rescue Black Mountain from total destruction. Thankfully, the state is in the process of buying Black Mountain to enshrine the peak for all of us to continue to enjoy. We owe so much to all of the children who took on the crusade to make a difference in the world, starting with southeastern Kentucky. I only wish that they will continue to believe in themselves, to know that they are a very important part of what we call democracy, because their voices were heard; they were sincere in their beliefs, and they didn't give up.

As teachers of literacy in a multicultural society, we have a choice. We can either teach literacy as a series of skills, or we can teach it as if words matter. Through the Saving Black Mountain project, the students who were involved discovered that words—their words—could have the power to effect change. While some of the adults who were involved sometimes doubted the children's ability to have an impact, teacher Sandy Adams said the students never gave up: "Somehow, in the back of my mind, I knew these kids could make a difference." We would suggest that this is what literacy in a democracy ought to be about.

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