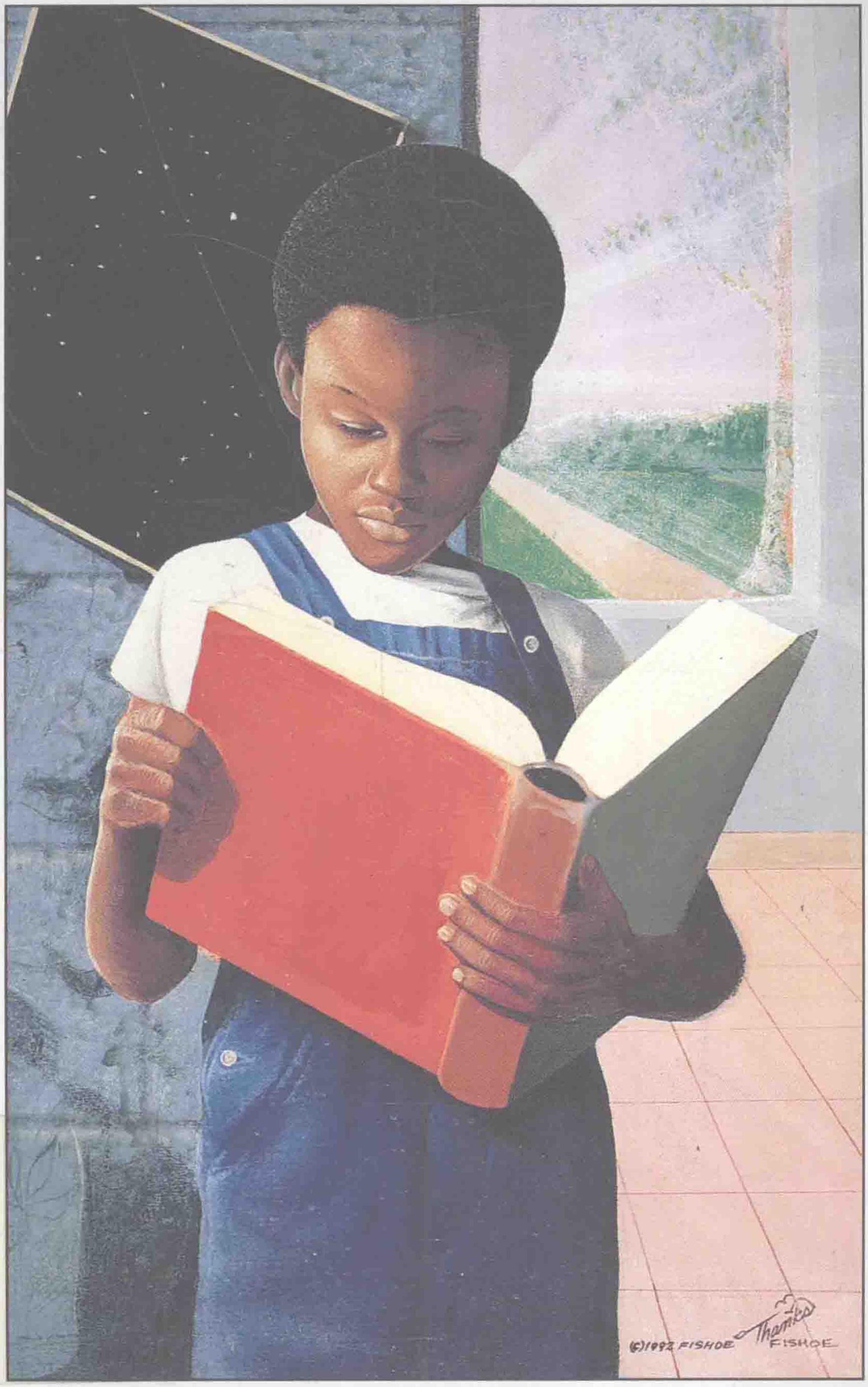
RETHINKING OUR CLASSROOMS



Teaching for Equity and Justice

VOLUME 1

A RETHINKING SCHOOLS PUBLICATION

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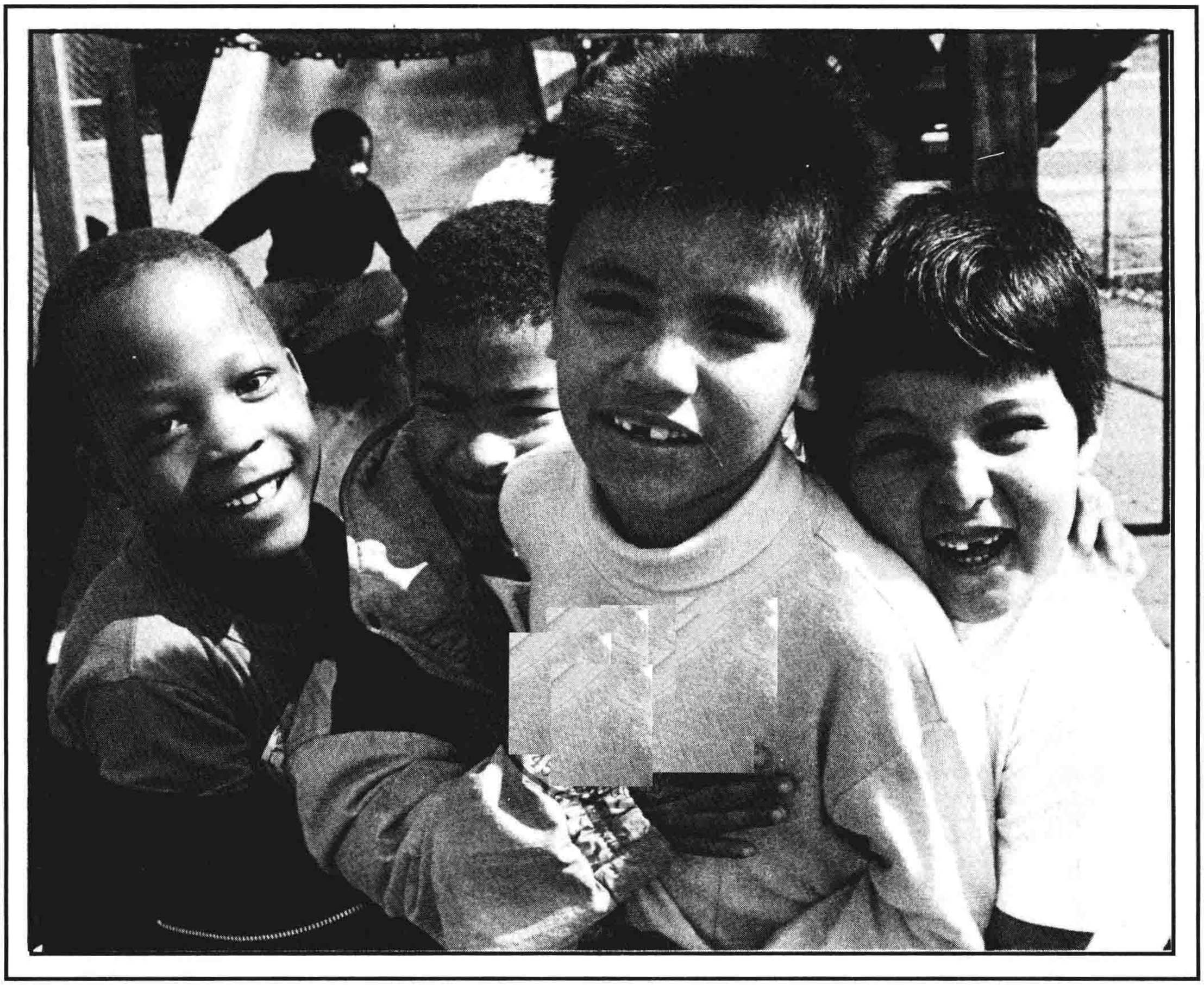


KATHY SLOANE

RETHINKING OUR CLASSROOMS

Teaching for Equity and Justice

A *Rethinking Schools* Publication

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Points of Departure includes a number of readings that exemplify the teaching principles we outline in the Introduction.

RETHINKING MY CLASSOOM

Rethinking My Classroom includes our "core" articles. At various grade levels and disciplines, five teachers offer concrete examples of how a social justice curriculum transformed their classroom practice.

TEACHING IDEAS

How do we prompt students to watch TV critically? How can we use math to unmask social inequities? Teaching Ideas provides a variety of classroom-tested activities that illustrate themes woven throughout the book.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

RETHINKING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

The articles in Rethinking Our Assumptions are filled with insights from teachers, scholars, and researchers on issues ranging from cultural differences between students and teachers to biases in children's literature.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Beyond the Classroom connects innovations in classroom practice with strategies for broader change, drawing on examples from around the country to identify possibilities and dangers.

TEACHING GUIDE/ RESOURCES

The Teaching Guide/Resources section includes curricula, books, videos, journals, and organizations that have been useful in constructing classrooms for social justice. Here, we also offer teaching ideas for using the poetry included in this volume.

Creating Classrooms for Equity and Social Justice

Rethinking Our Classrooms begins from the premise that schools and classrooms should be laboratories for a more just society than the one we now live in. Unfortunately, too many schools are training grounds for boredom, alienation, and pessimism. Too many schools fail to confront the racial, class, and gender inequities woven into our social fabric. Teachers are often simultaneously perpetrators and victims, with little control over planning time, class size, or broader school policies — and much less over the unemployment, hopelessness, and other "savage inequalities" that help shape our children's lives.

But *Rethinking Our Classrooms* is not about what we cannot do; it's about what we can do. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire writes that teachers should attempt to "live part of their dreams within their educational space." Classrooms can be places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make it a reality. We intend the articles in *Rethinking Our Classrooms* to be both visionary and practical; visionary because we need to be inspired by each other's vision of schooling; practical because for too long teachers have been preached at by theoreticians, well removed from classrooms, who are long on jargon and short on specific examples.

We've drawn the articles, stories, poems, and lessons in *Rethinking Our Classrooms* from different academic disciplines and grade levels. Despite variations in emphasis, a common social and pedagogical vision unites this collection. This vision is characterized by several interlocking components that together comprise what we call a social justice classroom. In *Rethinking Our Classrooms* we argue that curriculum and classroom practice must be:

• **Grounded in the lives of our students.** All good teaching begins with a respect for children, their innate curiosity and their capacity to learn. Curriculum should be rooted in children's needs and experiences. Whether we're teaching science, mathematics, English, or social studies, ultimately the class has to be about our students' lives as well as about a particular subject. Students should probe the ways their lives connect to the broader society, and are often limited by that society.

• **Critical**. The curriculum should equip students to "talk back" to the world. Students must learn to pose essential critical questions: Who makes decisions and who is left out? Who benefits and who suffers? Why is a given practice fair or unfair? What are its origins? What alternatives can we imagine? What is required to create change? Through critiques of advertising, cartoons, literature, legislative decisions, military interventions, job structures, newspapers, movies, agricultural practices, or school life, students should have opportunities to question social reality. Finally, student work must move outside the classroom walls, so that scholastic learning is linked to real world problems.

• **Multicultural, anti-racist, pro-justice.** In our earlier publication, *Rethinking Columbus*, we used the Discovery myth to demonstrate how children's literature and textbooks tend to value the lives of Great White Men over all others. Traditional materials invite children into Columbus's thoughts and dreams; he gets to speak, claim land, and re-name the ancient homelands of Native Americans, who appear to have no rights. Implicit in many traditional accounts of history is the notion that children should disregard the lives of women, working people, and especially people of color — they're led to view history and current events from the standpoint of the dominant groups. By contrast, a social justice curriculum must strive to include the lives of all those in our society, especially the marginalized and dominated. As anti-racist educator Enid Lee points out (see interview, p. 19), a rigorous multiculturalism should engage children in a critique of the roots of inequality in curriculum, school structure, and the larger society — always asking: How are we involved? What can we do?

• **Participatory, experiential.** Traditional classrooms often leave little room for student involvement and initiative. In a "rethought" classroom, concepts need to be experienced first-hand, not just read about or heard about. Whether through projects, role plays, simulations, mock trials, or experiments, students need to be mentally, and often physically, active. Our classrooms also must provoke students to develop their democratic capacities: to question, to challenge, to make real decisions, to collectively solve problems.

• **Hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary.** The ways we organize classroom life should seek to make children feel significant and cared about — by the teacher and by each other. Unless students feel emotionally and physically safe, they won't share real thoughts and feelings. Discussions will be tinny and dishonest. We need to design activities where students learn to trust and care for each other. Classroom life should, to the greatest extent possible, pre-fig-

ure the kind of democratic and just society we envision and thus contribute to building that society. Together students and teachers can create a "community of conscience," as educators Asa Hilliard and Gerald Pine call it.

• **Activist.** We want students to come to see themselves as truth-tellers and change-makers. If we ask children to critique the world but then fail to encourage them to act, our classrooms can degenerate into factories for cynicism. While it's not a teacher's role to direct students to particular organizations, it is a teacher's role to suggest that ideas should be acted upon and to offer students opportunities to do just that. Children can also draw inspiration from historical and contemporary efforts of people who struggled for justice. A critical curriculum should be a rainbow of resistance, reflecting the diversity of people from all cultures who acted to make a difference, many of whom did so at great sacrifice. Students should be allowed to learn about and feel connected to this legacy of defiance.

• **Academically rigorous.** A social justice classroom equips children not only to change the world but also to maneuver in the one that exists. Far from devaluing the vital academic skills young people need, a critical and activist curriculum speaks directly to the deeply rooted alienation that currently discourages millions of students from acquiring those skills.

A social justice classroom offers more *to* students than do traditional classrooms and expects more *from* students. Critical teaching aims to inspire levels of academic performance far greater than those motivated or measured by grades and test scores. When children write for real audiences, read books and articles about issues that really matter, and discuss big ideas with compassion and intensity, "academics" starts to breathe. Yes, we must help students "pass the tests," (even as we help them analyze and critique the harmful impact of test-driven education). But only by systematically reconstructing classroom life do we have any hope of cracking the cynicism that lies so close to the heart of massive school failure,

Rethinking Our Classrooms begins from the premise that schools and classrooms should be laboratories for a more just society than the one we now live in.

and of raising academic expectations and performance for all our children.

• **Culturally sensitive.** Critical teaching requires that we admit we don't know it all. Each class presents new challenges to learn from our students and demands that we be good researchers, and good listeners. These days, the demographic reality of schooling makes it likely that white teachers will enter classrooms filled with children of color. As African-American educator Lisa Delpit writes in her review of the book *White Teacher* (see p. 130), "When teachers are teaching children who are different from themselves, they must call upon parents in a collaborative fashion if they are to learn who their students really are." They must also call upon culturally diverse colleagues and community resources for insights into the communities they seek to serve. What can be said about racial and cultural differences between teachers and students also holds true for class differences.

* * * *

We're suspicious of the "inspirational speakers" administrators bring to faculty meetings, who exhort us to become super-teachers and classroom magicians. Critical teaching requires vision, support, and resources, not magic. We hope the stories, critiques, and lesson ideas here will offer useful examples which can be adapted in classrooms of all levels and disciplines and in diverse social milieus. Our goal is to provide a clear framework to guide classroom transformation.

But as vital as it is to re-imagine and re-organize classroom practice, ultimately it's insufficient. Teachers who want to construct more equitable, more meaningful, and more lively educational experiences for children must also concern themselves with issues beyond the classroom walls. For example, if a school uses so-called ability grouping to sort students, then no matter how successful we are in our efforts to remake classroom life, many students will still absorb negative messages about their capacity to achieve. We need to confront tracking and standardized testing, the funding inequalities within and between school districts, and the frequent unwillingness of teacher unions to address issues of quality education. Rethinking our classrooms requires rethinking the role of teacher unions and inventing strategies so that teachers can make alliances with parents and community organizations who have an interest in equity. Toward this end we've offered a chapter, "Beyond the Classroom."

As we go to press with this special edition of *Rethinking Schools*, there are many reasons to be discouraged about the future: Districts continue to slash budgets across the country; violence in our schools shows no signs of abating; attempts to privatize the schools have not slowed; and the country's productive resources are still used to make zippier video games, smarter smart bombs, and fancier athletic shoes, rather than used in less profitable arenas like education and affordable housing.

There is a Zulu expression: "If the future doesn't come towards you, you have to go fetch it." We hope *Rethinking Our Classrooms* will be a useful tool in the movement to go fetch a better future: in our classrooms, in our schools, and in the larger society. There are lots of us out there. Critical and activist teachers work all across the country. Let's make our voices heard. ❐

— the editors

Lions

By Langston Hughes

Lions in zoos
Shut up in a cage
Live a life of smothered rage.
Lions in the forest
Roaming free
Are happy as ever
Lions can be.

Langston Hughes is probably the most famous poet of the Harlem Renaissance. He chose to write about ordinary people — as he said, "workers, roustabouts, and singers, and job hunters...people up today and down tomorrow...beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten." (See p. 184 for lesson ideas.)

KATHY SLOANE

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Although the one-room schoolhouse is a relic of the past, certain patterns within American education have proven stubbornly durable: the dominance of the teacher's voice, reluctance to accept cultural diversity, and uncritical acceptance of the social and political order.

The articles in this introductory chapter show how teachers can challenge these patterns through classroom alternatives which deepen learning and enrich interactions between students and teachers.

Unlearning the Myths That Bind Us

Critiquing Fairy Tales and Films

By Linda Christensen

I was nourished on the milk of American culture: I cleaned the dwarves' house and waited for Prince Charming to bring me life; I played Minnie Mouse to Mickey's flower-bearing adoration, and, later, I swooned in Rhett Butler's arms — my waist as narrow and my bosom every bit as heaving as Scarlett's. But my daddy didn't own a plantation; he owned a rough and tumble bar frequented by loggers and fishermen. My waist didn't dip into an hourglass; in fact, according to the novels I read, my thick ankles doomed me to be cast as the peasant woman reaping hay while the heroine swept by with her handsome man in hot pursuit.

Our students suckle the same pap. They learn that women are passive, men are strong, and people of color are either absent or evil. Our society's culture industry colonizes their minds and teaches them how to act, live, and dream. The "secret education," as Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman dubs it, delivered by children's books and movies instructs students to accept the world as it is portrayed in these social blueprints. And often that world depicts the domination of one sex, one race, one class, or one country over a weaker counterpart. My student Omar wrote, "When we read children's books, we aren't just reading cute little stories, we are discovering the tools with which a young society is manipulated."

More than social primers, these tales, filled with ducks and mice and elephants in green suits, inhibit the ability of older students to question and argue with the texts they read. Children's literature is perhaps the most influential genre read. As my colleague Bill Bigelow noted, young people, unprotected by any intellectual armor, hear these stories again and again, often from the warmth of their mother's or father's lap. The messages, or "secret education," linked with the security of their parents' arms, underscore the power these texts deliver. The stereotypes and world view embedded in these stories become accepted knowledge.

Too often, my high school students read novels, history texts, and the daily paper as if they were watching a baseball game — they keep track of who's up, who's out, and the final score. They are consumers. Many students don't know how to read. I don't mean they are illiterate. They can read the words. They can answer multiple choice questions about who said "to be or not to be" and who wore a scarlet letter under his vest. But they just "walk on the words," as Brazilian educator Paulo Freire says, instead of wrestling with the words and ideas presented.

> 'Have you ever seen a Black person, an Asian, a Hispanic in a cartoon? Did they have a leading role or were they a servant? The hero or the villain?'

My goal is to give students the tools to critique every idea that encourages or legitimates social inequality — every idea that teaches them they are incapable of imagining and building a fundamentally equal and just society. Children shouldn't be taught that domination is normal or nice or funny. That's why we watch *The Little Mermaid* and read *The Ugly Duckling* in my high school English classes.

Exposing the Myths: How to Read Cartoons

We begin by reading the preface and first chapter of Ariel Dorfman's book *The Empire's Old Clothes*, subtitled, "What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and other innocent heroes do to our minds." I ask students to read Dorfman and keep track of their responses in a dialogue journal which consists of a paper folded in half from the top to the bottom. They quote or paraphrase Dorfman on the left side of the paper and argue, agree, or question him on the right. Dorfman writes in his book:

"Industrially produced fiction has become one of the primary shapers of our emotions and our intellect in the twentieth century. Although these stories are supposed to merely entertain us, they constantly give us a secret education. We are not only taught certain styles of violence, the latest fashions, and sex roles by TV, movies, magazines, and comic strips; we are also taught how to succeed, how to love, how to buy, how to conquer, how to forget the past and suppress the future. We are taught more than anything else, how not to rebel."

Thus, according to Dorfman, children's and popular literature function to maintain existing power relations in society and to undercut the possibility of greater democracy and equality.

I ask students if they agree with Dorfman's notion that children receive a "secret education." Do they remember any incidents from their own childhood that support his allegations? This is difficult for some students. The dialogue journal spurs them to argue, to talk back, to create a conversation with the writer. Dorfman is controversial. He gets under their skin. Many of them don't want to believe that they have been manipulated by children's books or advertising. As Dorfman writes:

"There has also been a tendency to avoid scrutinizing these mass media products too closely, to avoid asking the sort of hard questions that can yield disquieting answers. It is not strange that this should be so. The industry itself has declared time and again with great forcefulness that it is innocent, that no hidden motives or implications are lurking behind the cheerful faces it generates."

Dorfman's desire "to dissect those dreams, the ones that had nourished my childhood and adolescence, that continued to infect so many of my adult habits" bothered Justine, a senior in my Contemporary Literature and Society class a few years ago. In her dialogue journal she responded:

"Personally, handling the dissection of dreams has been a major cause of depression for me. Not so much dissecting — but how I react to what is found as a result of the operation. It can be overwhelming and discouraging to find out my whole self image has been formed mostly by others or underneath my worries about what I look like is years (17 of them) of being exposed to TV images of girls and their set roles given to them by TV and the media. It's painful to deal with. The idea of not being completely responsible for how I feel about things today is scary. So why dissect the dreams? Why not stay ignorant about them and happy? The reason for me is that those dreams are not unrelated to my everyday life. They influence how I behave, think, react to things. ... My dreams keep me from dealing with an unpleasant reality."

WALT DISNEY CO.

The jealous stepmother in *Snow White*.

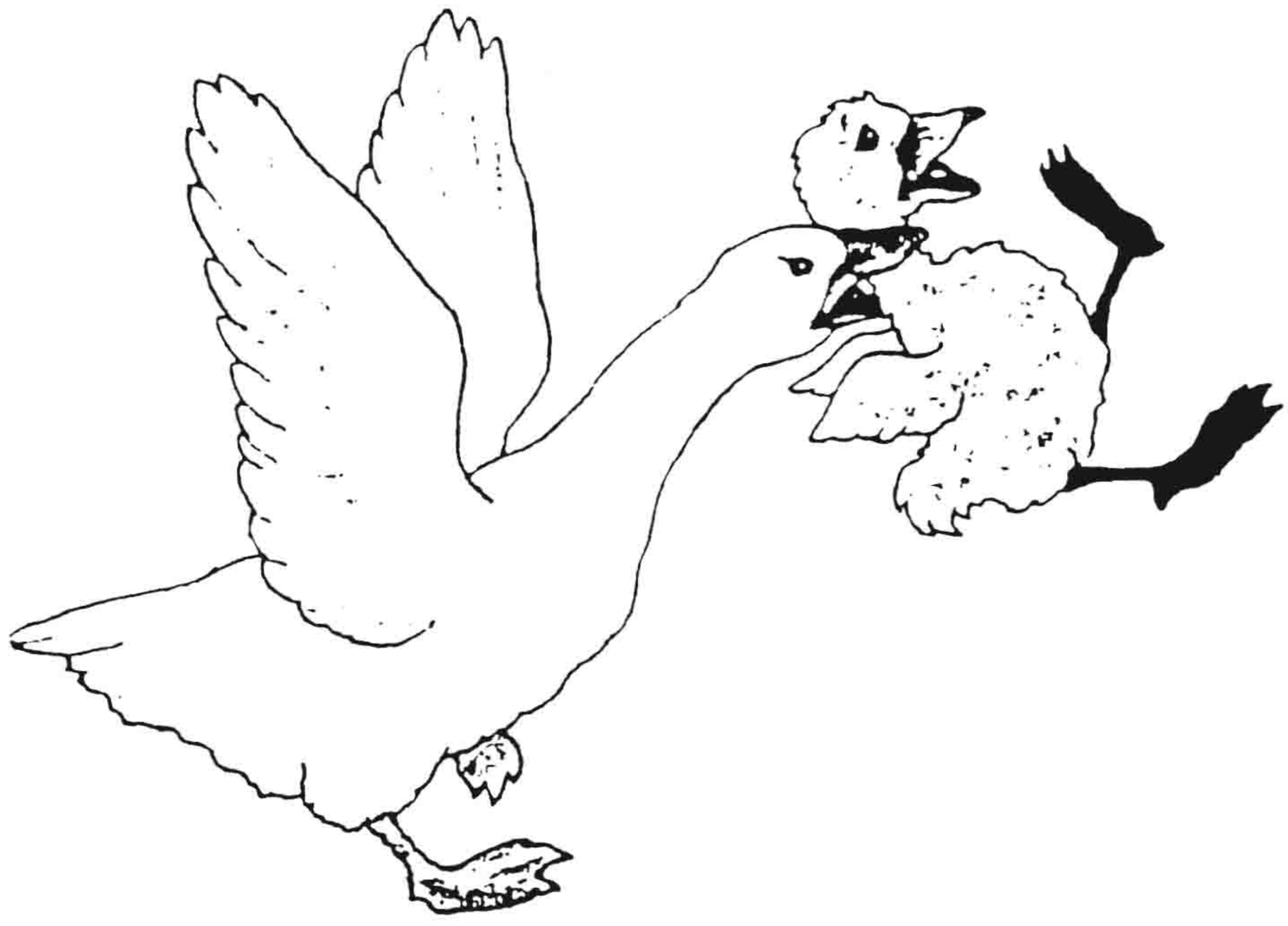
In looking back through this passage and others in Justine's dialogue with Dorfman, Justine displayed discomfort with prying apart her ideals, with discovering where she received her ideas, and yet she also grudgingly admitted how necessary this process was if she wanted to move beyond where she was at the time. Her discomfort might also have arisen from feeling incapable of changing herself or changing the standards by which she is judged in the larger society. In a later section of her journal, she wrote, "True death equals a generation living by rules and attitudes they never questioned and producing more children who do the same."

Justine's reaction is typical of many students. She was beginning to peel back the veneer covering some of the injustice in our society. She appreciated the importance of constructing a more liberatory set of possibilities for girls and women, but at the same time was overwhelmed by the hugeness of this task — unsure if she would have anything to hang on to after she began dismantling her old values.

Charting Stereotypes

To help students both dismantle those old values and reconstruct more just ones, I carry twin objectives with me when we begin this study of children's culture: first, to critique portrayals of hierarchy and inequality, but also to enlist students in imagining a better world, characterized by relationships of mutual respect and equality. We start by watching cartoons and children's movies — Bugs Bunny,

Popeye, Daffy Duck, and Heckle and Jeckle videos in one class; in my freshman class we also watch Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. On first viewing, students sometimes resist critical analysis. Kamaui said, "This is just a dumb little cartoon with some ducks running around in clothes." Later they notice the absence of female characters in many of the cartoons. When women do appear, they look like Jessica Rabbit or Playboy centerfolds. We keep track of the appearance of people of color in classic children's movies — Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White. We look at the roles women, men, people of color, and poor people play in the same films. We also cover men's roles. As they view each episode, they fill in a chart. Here is a partial sample from the ninth grade class evaluation of *The Little Mermaid*.



The Ugly Duckling

Women's Roles:

Ariel: Pretty, white, shapely, kind. Goal: Marry the prince.

Ursula: Fat, white, mean. Goals: Get back at Triton, power.

Maid: Chubby, confused, nice, white. Goals: Meals on time, clean clothes.

People of Color: None, although Sebastian the crab is Jamaican and the court musician.

Poor People: Servants. No poor people have major roles.

After filling in a couple of charts, collectively and on their own, students write about the generalizations children might take away from these tales. The ninth graders are quick to point out the usual stereotypes on their own, "Look, Ursula the sea witch is ugly and smart. The young, pretty ones only want to hook their man; the old, pretty ones are mean because they are losing their looks." Kenneth noticed that people of color and poor people are either absent or servants to the rich, white, pretty people. Tyler pointed out that the roles of men are limited as well. Men must be virile and wield power or be old and the object of "good-natured" humor.

Both the freshmen and the seniors write critiques of the cartoons, targeting parents or teachers as an audience. Mira, a senior two years ago, attacked the racism in these Saturday morning rituals. Because of her familiarity with Native American cultures, her analysis was more developed:

"Indians in Looney Tunes are also depicted as inferior human beings. These characters are stereotypical to the greatest degree, carrying tomahawks, painting their faces, and sending smoke signals as their only means of communication. They live in tipis and their language reminds the viewer of Neanderthals. We begin to imagine Indians as savages with bows and arrows and long black braids. There's no room in our minds for knowledge of the differences between tribes, like the Cherokee alphabet or Celilo salmon fishing."

A Black Cinderella?

Kenya, a freshman, scolded parents in her essay, "A Black Cinderella? Give Me A Break." "Have you ever seen a Black person, an Asian, a Hispanic in a cartoon? Did they have a leading role or were they a servant? What do you think this is doing to your child's mind?" She ended her piece, "Women who aren't White begin to feel left out and ugly because they never get to play the princess." Kenya's piece bristled with anger at a society that rarely acknowledges the wit or beauty of women of her race. But she wasn't alone in her feelings. Sabrina W. wrote, "I'm not taking my kids to see any Walt Disney movies until they have a Black woman playing the leading role." They wanted the race of the actors changed, but they didn't challenge the class or underlying gender inequities that also accompany the lives of Cinderella, Ariel, and Snow White.

Kenya's and Sabrina's anger is justified. There should be more women of color who play the leads in these white-on-white wedding cake tales. But I want them to understand that if the race of the main character is the only thing changing, injustice will remain. We read Mary Carter Smith's delightful retelling of Cinderella, "Cindy Ellie, A Modern Fairy Tale," which reads like laughter — bubbly, warm, spilling over with infectious good humor and playful language. In Smith's version, Cindy Ellie, who lives in East Baltimore, was "one purty young black sister, her skin like black velvet." Her father, "like so many good men, was weak for a pretty face and big legs and big hips." Her step-mother "had a heart as hard as a rock. The milk of human kindness had curdled in her breast. But she did have a pretty face, big legs, and great big hips. ... Well, that fool man fell right into that woman's trap." Cindy Ellie's step-sisters were "two big-footed, ugly

gals" who made Cindy Ellie wait on them hand and foot. When the "good white folks, the good Asian folks, and the good black folks all turned out and voted for a good black brother, running for mayor" there was cause for celebration, and a chance for Cindy Ellie to meet her Prince Charming, the mayor's son. With the help of her godma's High John the Conqueror Root, Cindy Ellie looked like an "African Princess." "Her rags turned into a dazzling dress of pink African laces! Her hair was braided into a hundred shining braids, and on the end of each braid were beads of pure gold! ... Golden bracelets covered her arms clean up to her elbows! On each ear hung five small diamond earrings. On her tiny feet were dainty golden sandals encrusted with dazzling jewels! Cindy Ellie was laid back!"

The students and I love the story. It is well told and incorporates rich details that do exactly what Sabrina, Kenya, and their classmates wanted — it celebrates the beauty, culture, and language of African Americans. It also puts forth the possibility of cross-race alliances for social change.

But, like the original tale, Cindy Ellie's main goal in life is not working to end the plight of the homeless or teaching kids to read. Her goal, like Cinderella the First's, is to get her man. Both young women are transformed and made beautiful through new clothes, new jewels, new hairstyles. Both have chauffeurs who deliver them to their men. Cindy Ellie and Cinderella are nicer and kinder than their step-sisters, but the Prince and Toussant, the mayor's son, don't know that. Both of the C-girls compete for their men against their sisters and the rest of the single women in their cities. They "win" because of their beauty and their fashionable attire. Both of these tales leave African American and white women with two myths: happiness means getting a man, and transformation from wretched conditions can be achieved through new clothes and a new hairstyle.

I am uncomfortable with those messages. I don't want students to believe that change can be bought at the mall, nor do I want them thinking that the pinnacle of a woman's life is an "I do" that supposedly leads them to a "happily ever after." I don't want my women stu-

Rethinking 'The Three Little Pigs'

By Ellen Wolpert

There's scarcely a parent or young child who isn't familiar with "The Three Little Pigs." It has a simple plot line, is easily remembered, and it's so much fun imitating the big bad wolf as he huffs and puffs and "blo-o-ws" the house down.

I find the story is also useful to talk about the stereotypes in so many of our favorite tales.

I first became aware of the story's hidden messages when we were doing a unit on housing several years ago at my daycare center. As part of the unit, we talked about different homes and the many approaches to solving a basic human need: a place to live.

An Interesting Question

During the discussion I suddenly thought to myself, "Why are brick homes better than straw homes?"

To this day, I'm not completely sure why that question popped into my mind. I do know, however, that I had been sensitized by the movement for a multicultural curriculum, which had taught me to take a questioning approach to even the most seemingly innocuous materials and to look beneath the surface for hidden assumptions.

Why are brick homes better than straw homes?

After thinking about it, I realized that one of the most fundamental messages of "The Three Little Pigs" is that it belittles straw and stick homes and the "lazy types" who build them. On the other hand, the story extols the virtues of brick homes, suggesting that they are built by serious, hard-working people and strong enough to withstand adversity.

Is there any coincidence that brick homes tend to be built by people in Western countries, often by those with more money? That straw homes are more common in non-European cultures, particularly Africa and Asia?

Once I realized some of these hidden messages, the question became what to do about it. In my experience, the best approach is not to put-down such beloved tales and refuse to read them, but to use them to pose questions for children. One might explain, for example, that in many tropical areas straw homes are built to take best advantage of cooling breezes. In some areas, straw homes are on stilts as protection from insects and animals or to withstand flooding.

Such a perspective then becomes part of a broader process of helping children to understand why homes are different in different parts of the world — and that just because something is different doesn't mean it's inferior. ❐

Ellen Wolpert is director of the Washington-Beech Community Preschool in Boston.

dents to see their "sisters" as competition for that scarce and wonderful commodity — men. As Justine wrote earlier in her dialogue journal, it can be overwhelming and discouraging to find our self-images have been formed by others, but if we don't dissect them, we will continue to be influenced by them.

Writing as a Vehicle for Change

I hoped the essays they wrote critiquing cartoons would force students to look deeper into the issues — to challenge the servant/master relationships or the materialism that makes women appealing to their men. For some students the cartoon unit exposes the wizardry that controls our dreams and desires — our self images — but others shrug their shoulders at this. It's OK for some people to be rich and others poor; they just want to see more rich people of color or more rich women. Or better yet, be rich themselves. They accept the inequalities in power and economic relationships. Their acceptance teaches me how deep the roots of these myths are planted and how much some students, in the absence of visions for a different and better world, need to believe in the fairy tale magic that will transform their lives.

Mira and her classmates wrote their most passionate essays of the year on this topic. But venting their frustrations with cartoons — and even sharing it with their class — seemed an important, but limited task. Yes, they could write articulate essays. Yes, they honed their arguments and sought the just-right examples from their viewing. Through critiques and the discussions that followed they were helping to transform each other — each comment or observation helped expose the engine of our society, and they were both excited and dismayed by their discoveries. But what was I teaching them if the lesson ended there? Ultimately, I was teaching that it was enough to be critical without taking action, that we could quietly rebel in the privacy of the classroom while we were practicing our writing skills, but we didn't really have to do anything about the problems we uncovered, nor did we need to create

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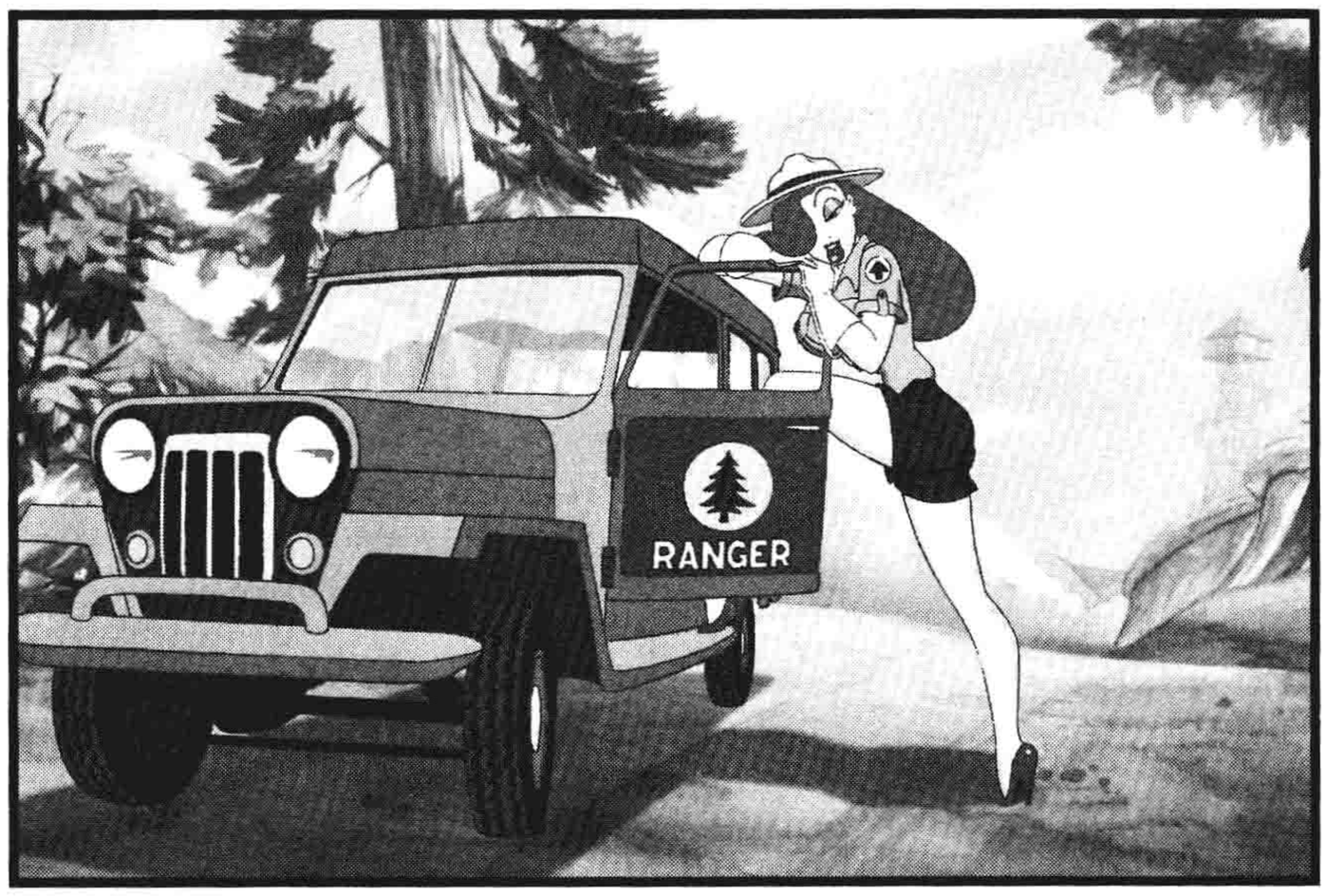
Aladdin



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Jessica Rabbit from Looney Tunes.

anything to take the place of what we'd expelled. And those were not the lessons I intended to teach. I wanted to develop their critical consciousness, but I also hoped to move them to action.

But for some students — especially the seniors — the lesson didn't end in the classroom. Many who watched cartoons before we started our study say they can no longer enjoy them. Now instead of seeing a bunch of ducks in clothes, they see the racism, sexism, and violence that swim under the surface of the stories. Pam and Nicole swore they would not let their children watch cartoons. David told the class of coming home one day and finding his nephews absorbed in Looney Tunes. "I turned that TV off and took them down to the park to play. They aren't going to watch that mess while I'm around." Radiance described how she went to buy Christmas presents for her niece and nephew. "Before, I would have just walked into the toy store and bought them what I knew they wanted — Nintendo or Barbie. But this time, I went up the clerk and said, 'I want a toy that isn't sexist or racist.'"

Students have also said that what they saw in cartoons, they see in advertising, on prime time TV, on the

news, in school. Turning off the cartoons didn't stop the sexism and racism. They couldn't escape, and now that they'd started analyzing cartoons, they couldn't stop analyzing the rest of the world. And sometimes they wanted to stop. During a class discussion Sabrina S. said, "I realized these problems weren't just in cartoons. They were in everything — every magazine I picked up, every television show I watched, every billboard I passed by on the street." As Justine wrote earlier, at times they would like to remain "ignorant and happy." The following year it became more evident than ever that if we stayed with critique and didn't move to action students might slump into cynicism.

Taking Action

To capture the passion and alleviate the pain, Tim Hardin, a Jefferson English teacher, and I decided to get the students out of the classroom with their anger — to allow their writing and their learning to become vehicles for change. Instead of writing the same classroom essays students had written the years before, we asked students to think of an audience for their cartoon analysis. Most students chose parents. A few chose their peers. Then they decided how they wanted to reach them. Some wanted to create a pamphlet which could be distributed at PTA meetings throughout the city. That night they went home with assignments they'd given each other — Sarah would watch Saturday morning cartoons; Sandy, Brooke, and Carmel would watch after-school cartoons; and Kristin and Toby were assigned before-school cartoons. They ended up writing a report card for the various programs. They graded each show A-F and wrote a brief summary of their findings:

"DUCK TALES: At first glance the precocious ducks are cute, but look closer and see that the whole show is based on money. All their adventures revolve around finding money. Uncle Scrooge and the gang teach children that money is the only important thing in life. Grade: C-

"TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: Pizza-eating Ninja Turtles.

I don't want my students to believe that change can be bought at the mall.

What's the point? There isn't any. The show is based on fighting the 'bad guy,' Shredder. Demonstrating no concern for the townspeople, they battle and fight, but never get hurt. This cartoon teaches a false sense of violence to kids: fight and you don't get hurt or solve problems through fists and swords instead of words. Grade: D

"POPEYE: This show oozes with horrible messages from passive Olive Oyl to the hero 'man' Popeye. This cartoon portrays ethnic groups as stupid. It is political also — teaching children that Americans are the best and conquer all others. Grade: F."

On the back of the pamphlet, they listed some tips for parents to guide them in wise cartoon selection.

Most of the other students wrote articles they hoped to publish in various local and national newspapers or magazines. (See p. 83) Catkin wrote about the sexual stereotyping and adoration of beauty in children's movies. Her article describes how she and other teenage women carry these messages with them still:

"Women's roles in fairy tales distort reality — from Jessica Rabbit's six-mile strut in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* to Tinkerbelle's obsessive vanity in *Peter Pan*. These seemingly innocent stories teach us to look for our faults. As Tinkerbelle inspects her tiny body in a mirror only to find that her minute hips are simply too huge, she shows us how to turn the mirror into an enemy. ... And this scenario is repeated in girls' locker rooms all over the world. ... Because we can never look like Cinderella, we begin to hate ourselves. The Barbie syndrome starts as we begin a life-long search for the perfect body. Crash diets, fat phobias, and an obsession with the materialistic become commonplace. The belief that a product will make us rise above our competition, our friends, turns us into addicts. Our fix is that Calvin Klein push-up bra, Guess jeans, Chanel lipstick, and the latest in suede flats. We don't call it deception; we call it good taste. And soon it feels awkward going to the mailbox without makeup."

Catkin hopes to publish her piece in a magazine for young women so they will begin to question the origin of the standards by which they judge themselves.

The writing in these articles is tighter and cleaner because it has the potential for a real audience beyond the classroom walls. The possibility of publishing their pieces changed the level of students' intensity for the project. Anne, who turned in hastily written drafts last year, said, "Five drafts and I'm not finished yet!"

But more importantly, students saw themselves as actors in the world; they were fueled by the opportunity to convince some parents of the long-lasting effects cartoons impose on their children or to enlighten their peers about the roots of some of their insecurities. Instead of leaving students full of bile, standing around with their hands on their hips, shaking their heads about how bad the world is, we provided them the opportunity to make a difference. ❐

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10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism

By the Council on Interracial Books for Children

Both in school and out, young children are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes — expressed over and over in books and in other media — gradually distort their perceptions until stereotypes and myths about minorities and women are accepted as reality. It is difficult for a librarian or teacher to convince children to question society's attitudes. But if a child can be shown how to detect racism and sexism in a book, the child can proceed to transfer the perception to wider areas. The following ten guidelines are offered as a starting point in evaluating children's books from this perspective.

1. Check the Illustrations

Look for Stereotypes. A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, or sex, which usually carries derogatory implications. In addition to blatant stereotypes, look for variations which in any way demean or ridicule characters because of their race or sex.

Look for Tokenism. If there are non-white characters in the illustrations, do they look just like whites except for being tinted or colored in? Do all minority faces look stereotypically alike, or are they depicted as genuine individuals with distinctive features?

Who's Doing What? Do the illustrations depict minorities in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Are males the active "doers" and females the inactive observers?

2. Check the Story Line

The Civil Rights Movement led publishers to weed out many insulting passages, particularly from stories with Black themes, but the attitudes still find expression in less obvious ways. The following checklist suggests some of the subtle (covert) forms of bias to watch for.

Standard for Success. Does it take "white" behavior standards for a person of color to "get ahead"? Is "making it" in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal? To gain acceptance and approval, do people of color have to exhibit extraordinary qualities — excel in sports, get A's, etc.? In friendships between white children and children of color, is it the child of color who does most of the understanding and forgiving?

Resolution of Problems. How are problems presented, conceived, and resolved in the story? Are people of color considered to be "the problem?" Are the oppressions faced by people of color and women represented as causally related to an unjust society? Are the reasons for poverty and oppression explained, or are they just accepted as inevitable? Does the story line encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? Is a particular problem that is faced by a person of color resolved through the benevolent intervention of a white person?

Role of Women. Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or are they due to their good looks or to their relationship with boys? Are sex roles incidental or critical to characterization and plot? Could the same story be told if the sex roles were reversed?

3. Look at the Lifestyles

Are people of color and their setting depicted in such a way that they contrast unfavorably with the unstated norm of white middle-class suburbia? If the non-white group is depicted as "different," are negative value judgments implied? Are people of color depicted exclusively in ghettos, barrios, or migrant camps? If the illustrations and text attempt to depict another culture, do they go beyond oversimplifications and offer genuine insights into another lifestyle? Look for inaccuracy and inappropriateness in the depiction of other cultures. Watch for instances of the "quaint-natives-in-costume" syndrome (most noticeable in areas like costume and custom, but extending to behavior and personality traits as well).

4. Weigh the Relationships Between People

• Do the whites in the story possess the power, take the leadership, and make the important decisions? Do people of color and females function in essentially supporting roles?

• How are family relationships depicted? In African-American families, is the mother always dominant? In Latino families, are there always lots of children? If the family is separated, are societal conditions — unemployment, poverty — cited among the reasons for the separation?

5. Note the Heroes

For many years, books showed only "safe" non-white heroes — those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment of their time. People of color are insisting on the right to define their own heroes (of both sexes) based on their own concepts and

struggles for justice.

• When minority heroes do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous or because what they have done has benefited white people? Ask this question: "Whose interest is a particular figure really serving?"

6. Consider the Effects on a Child's Self Image

• Are norms established which limit the child's aspirations and self-concepts? What effect can it have on African-American children to be continuously bombarded with images of the color white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, virtue, etc., and the color black as evil, dirty, menacing, etc.? Does the book counteract or reinforce this positive association with the color white and negative association with black?

• What happens to a girl's self-esteem when she reads that boys perform all of the brave and important deeds? What about a girl's self-esteem if she is not "fair" of skin and slim of body?

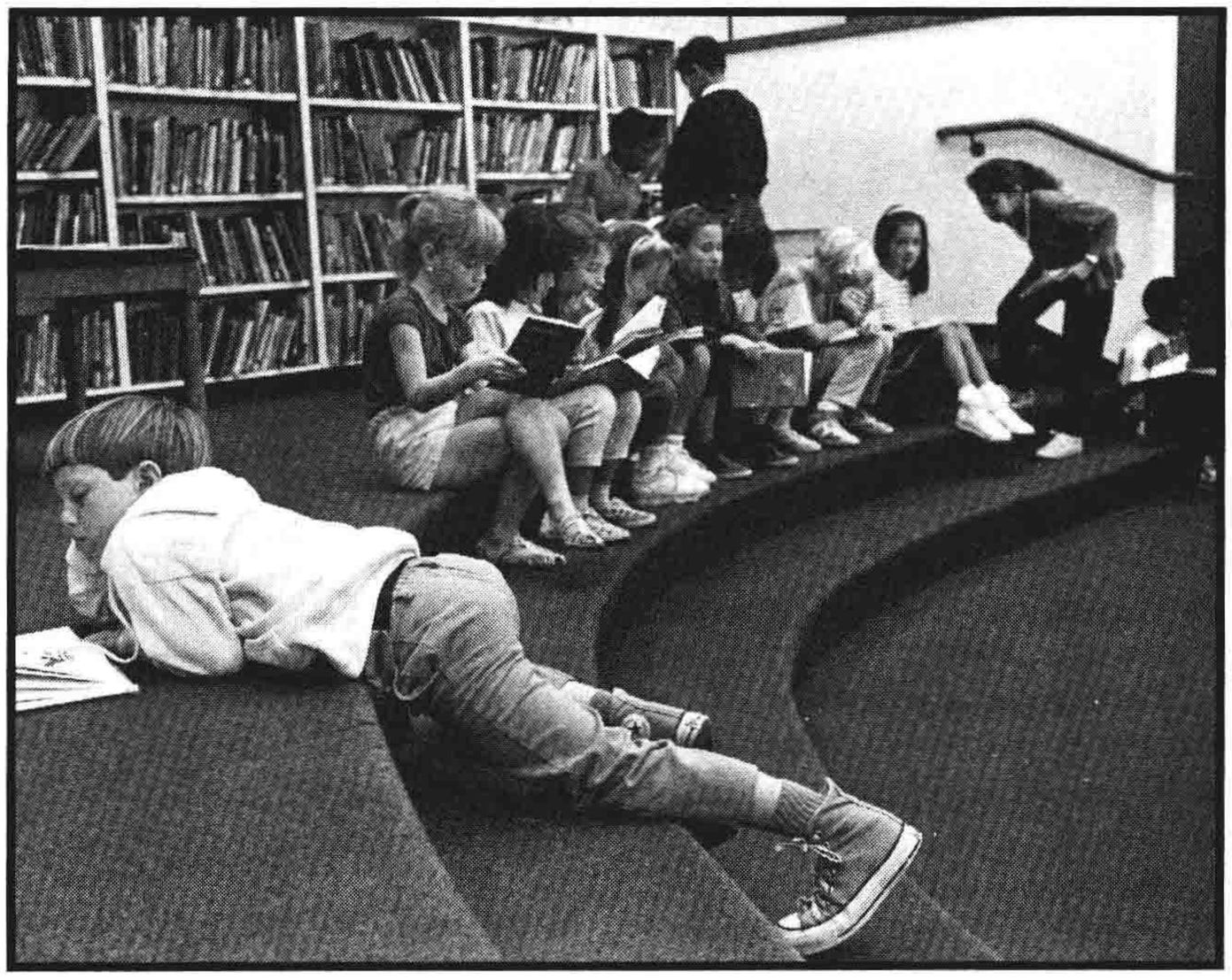
• In a particular story, is there one or more person with whom a child of color can readily identify to a positive and constructive end?

7. Consider the Author or Illustrator's Background

Analyze the biographical material on the jacket flap or the back of the book. If a story deals with a multicultural theme, what qualifies the author or illustrator to deal with the subject? If the author and illustrator are not members of the group being written about, is there anything in their background that would specifically recommend them as the creators of this book? The same criteria apply to a book that deals with the feelings and insights of women or girls.

8. Check Out the Author's Perspective

No author can be wholly objective. All authors write out of a cultural as well as personal context. Children's books in the past have traditionally come from white, middle-class authors, with one result being that a single ethnocentric perspective has dominated American children's literature. With the book in question, look carefully to determine whether the direction of the author's perspective substantially weakens or strengthens the value of his/her written work. Are omissions and distortions central to the overall character or "message" of the book?



KATHY SLOANE

Choosing good books is a key step in anti-bias teaching.

9. Watch for Loaded Words

A word is loaded when it has insulting overtones. Examples of loaded adjectives (usually racist) are "savage," "primitive," "conniving," "lazy," "superstitious," "treacherous," "wily," "crafty," "inscrutable," "docile," and "backward."

• Look for sexist language and adjectives that exclude or ridicule women. Look for use of the male pronoun to refer to both males and females. The following examples show how sexist language can be avoided: "ancestors" instead of "forefathers;" "firefighters" instead of "firemen;" "manufactured" instead of "manmade;" the "human family" instead of the "family of man."

10. Look at the Copyright Date

Books on "minority" themes — usually hastily conceived — suddenly began appearing in the mid-1960s. There followed a growing number of "minority experience" books to meet the new market demand, but most of these were still written by white authors, edited by white editors, and published by white publishers. They therefore reflected a white point of view. Only recently has the children's book world begun to even remotely reflect the realities of a multiracial society or the concerns of feminists.

The copyright dates, therefore, can be a clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly racist or sexist, although a recent copyright date is no guarantee of a book's relevance or sensitivity. The copyright date only means the year the book was published. It usually takes a minimum of a year — and often much more than that — from the time a manuscript is submitted to the publisher to the time it is actually printed and put on the market. This time-lag meant very little in the past, but in a time of rapid change and changing consciousness, when children's book publishing is attempting to be "relevant," it is increasingly significant. ❐