



Thinking Critically  
and Teaching Differently  
in the Primary Grades



# black ants and buddhists



**Mary Cowhey**

Foreword by Sonia Nieto



Stenhouse Publishers  
Portland, Maine

Stenhouse Publishers  
www.stenhouse.com

Copyright © 2006 by Mary Cowhey

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the publisher.

Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders and students for permission to reproduce borrowed material. We regret any oversights that may have occurred and will be pleased to rectify them in subsequent reprints of the work.

*Credit*

Page 146: Excerpt from *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Copyright © 1995 by James Loewen. Reprinted by permission of The New Press.

Pages 180–181: This first aired as a public radio commentary on WFCR in Amherst, MA.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Cowhey, Mary, 1960–

Black ants and buddhists : thinking critically and teaching differently in the primary grades / Mary Cowhey ; foreword by Sonia Nieto.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-57110-418-6 (alk. paper)

1. Multicultural education—United States. 2. Elementary school teaching—United States. 3. Cultural awareness—Study and teaching (Primary)—United States. 4. Minorities—Education (Primary)—United States. I. Title.

LC1099.3.C699 2006

370.117—dc22

2005058138

Back cover photo courtesy of Susan Fink

Cover and interior design by Martha Drury

Manufactured in the United States of America on acid-free paper

11 10 09 08 07 06 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1





# CONTENTS

	<i>Foreword by Sonia Nieto</i>	vii
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<b>prologue</b>	Black Ants and Buddhism	1
<b>1</b>	Introduction	14
<b>2</b>	Compassion, Action, and Change	22
<b>3</b>	Routines: A Day in the Life of the Peace Class	36
<b>4</b>	It Takes a Village to Teach First Grade	57
<b>5</b>	Talking About Peace	81
<b>6</b>	Learning Through Activism	101
<b>7</b>	Teaching History So Children Will Care	122
<b>8</b>	Nurturing History Detectives	140
<b>9</b>	Seeing Ourselves and Our Families Through Students' Eyes	164
<b>10</b>	Responding When Tragedy Enters the Classroom	179
<b>11</b>	Building Trust with Families and Weathering Controversy	193
<b>12</b>	Going Against the Grain	208
<b>afterword</b>	"Take This Hammer"	224
	<i>Appendix</i>	229
	<i>Sample Progression for "Exploration and Contact" Unit</i>	229
	<i>Sample Peace Class News</i>	240
	<i>References</i>	241



## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

**Homework: Write your own story problem.**

Write and solve an addition story problem. Write about an adding situation you might find in your home. Use words, number or pictures to show how you solved the problem.

At my house. There were 58 ants.  
22 more come to my house.  
How many ants are at my house?

$$\begin{array}{r} 58 \\ + 22 \\ \hline 80 \end{array}$$

*Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.*

—Paulo Freire

**M**y first encounter with Paulo Freire was accidental. I was a thirty-four-year-old student, taking my first undergraduate education course at Smith College. I felt awkward in my new Ivy League surroundings, having recently moved from the ghetto in South Philadelphia. My professor gave us an article to read and asked us to write a “response paper.” I had dropped out of college sixteen years earlier to become a community labor organizer, and I couldn’t remember having ever been asked to write a “response paper.” Something in the article reminded me of when I was an organizer in Trenton, New Jersey. That’s what I wrote about in my “response.”

A couple of Guatemalan car washers came to the weekly workers meeting and complained that they had just been fired from the car wash because they had told the other workers that the boss was skimming most of the tip money out of the tip box. The workers had been strip-searched and beaten with brushes before being fired. The meeting also drew nearly a dozen Puerto Rican welders, whose case we’d been fighting with the National Labor Relations Board. The welders urged the car washers to fight their case. The car washers said no, they did not trust our government to help them, and they could not risk being sent back to Guatemala, where they might be killed. Frustrated, the welders asked them what they wanted then.

“We want to learn English,” one young car washer said, “so we can defend ourselves.” The other members considered this and argued about it. Eventually a middle-aged man named Bonifacio and a young single mother of four named Ivette volunteered to teach them. They were both somewhat fluent in English, although neither had any formal teaching experience or a high school diploma. Several of the welders agreed to help out, if the car washers would help them with a renovation project at our office.

The next Tuesday evening, I met with Bonifacio, Ivette, and Ramón, the leader of the welders, before the class was to begin. Teaching English was not part of my organizing repertoire; I asked the others how they thought we should start. Ramón was definite. “First class: words for work.” He began to dictate sentences, in Spanish, English, or Spanglish. “My name is \_\_\_. I am Puerto Rican. My Social Security number is \_\_\_. How much is the pay?” Ivette and Bonifacio helped with the translations. Ivette typed the lesson on a mimeograph stencil. When the Guatemalan car washers arrived with nearly a dozen of their coworkers, Ramon taught two of them how to run the mimeograph machine and recruited them to come early each week to run it before the class started.



At the next meeting, there was a report about the Survival English class and a lively discussion in Spanish about what else the class members should learn. When one of the car washers reported how his brother's hand had gotten mangled in the rollers that week, and how the boss had threatened to fire him if he didn't repair the rollers by morning, they decided that the next lesson should be "words for getting hurt," which included an orientation to workers' compensation rights and occupational safety issues.

Another week, some of the Guatemalan workers, who rented cot space in overcrowded apartments divided by sheets, complained that they had no heat. That inspired "words for where you live" about tenant rights and finding apartments. There were "words for police" and "words for doctors." The lessons arose directly from the immediate struggles the workers faced in their daily lives. There were no lessons about conjugating verbs or making plurals.

The Central American workers learned their rights and the inequities of American society as they learned English. Each week more of them came and brought their friends—gravediggers, nursery workers, and roofers—to the Survival English classes, the meetings, and the renovation sessions. In the meantime, the American workers, mostly Puerto Rican and African American, realized that many of the rights they were learning about and using in their organizing did not extend to undocumented workers, just as many of the labor laws did not recognize domestic, agricultural, or temporary workers. They began to consider labor issues more globally. Together they developed strategies and organized for mutual benefit and protection.

I was nervous when the professor returned the papers. I didn't know if telling the story of the Survival English classes was an appropriate "response." On the paper the professor had written a comment asking when I had read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I went to her after class and asked her what that was. She said she thought I'd read it already. She said that it was dense to read but that she thought I would like it.

## getting to know paulo

---

The following summer, I had a work-study job at the Smith College library. Most of our patrons were students in the summer session of the School for Social Work. I worked at the reserve window and soon discovered that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was on reserve. That entire sum-



mer, between checking materials in and out for people, I struggled through *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I read a paragraph, reread it, read the next, and then reread the previous two. The theoretical language made my head swim. Because I had been an organizer for many years, the political aspect of the book was more familiar than the pedagogical aspect.

The following summer, I worked on the reserve desk and read it again. It was hard for me to picture Paulo Freire as an organizer. I couldn't imagine this guy sitting down with a bunch of illiterate Brazilian peasants, let alone Puerto Rican welders and Guatemalan car washers, gravediggers, and roofers.

After two labored readings, I grasped a few big ideas. Freire said that teaching was a political act; I agreed. Freire criticized the "banking concept" of education, in which the students are viewed as ignorant, empty receptacles, to be filled with deposits of knowledge, provided by the teacher. He said that the traditional "banking concept" approach stifled creativity and critical thinking and served to enforce oppression. He contrasted this with what he called "problem-posing" education, in which students and teachers are coinvestigators of problems that arise organically from their daily experiences.

In problem-posing education, the teacher isn't the sole source of knowledge. Dialog between students and a teacher is part of an inquiry process that encourages critical thinking. I could see the connection between Freire's concept of problem-posing education and the Survival English class story, but beyond that, I felt pretty stupid and thought I really didn't get it.

Then I started teaching. I became a teacher because I knew I wanted to make a positive change in the world. I had a head packed full of theory and a one-year teaching contract. I knew already that every new teacher in my district would get a layoff notice before the year was over. I had nothing to lose. I taught like I had a year to live and everything to learn. I had no furniture and no supplies in my classroom to set up, so I spent the week before school started going door to door in the community, visiting the families of my students. That felt familiar. I could teach like an organizer. I didn't worry about not understanding everything Paulo Freire wrote. I was ready to teach.

A couple of years later, in graduate school at the University of Massachusetts, Dr. Sonia Nieto reintroduced me to Paulo Freire, with his *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*. By then, I felt Freire was more like a wise old friend. I could make out, relate to, understand, and use some of what he said. Needless to say, I am not an



academic authority on Freire's theory, but I can humbly and honestly say that his theory informs my work.

## teaching critically

---

I choose to teach critically because I believe young children are capable of amazing things, far more than is usually expected of them. I am not talking about raising a score on a standardized math test (although that often happens). I am talking about thinking critically and learning to learn, learning to use basic skills like reading, writing, solving mathematical problems, analyzing data, public speaking, scientific observation, and inquiry as an active citizen in your community. I believe young children can think about fairness and are deeply moved and highly motivated by the recognition of injustice. I choose to teach critically because it lets me keep learning alongside my students. It keeps my work fascinating, funny, and fast-paced. I teach this way so that I can hear every child's voice and see each jewel sparkle.

I decided to write this book because people often ask me questions about the way I teach. The central question seems to be, How can teachers of young children use language and literacy to teach about the world (history, geography, social studies, science) with rigor, depth, and challenge in a way that engages and empowers young students? I believe theory emerges from the practice, and that the very best teaching merges theory, practice, and reflection.

• • •

In the introduction to *Rethinking Our Classrooms* edited by Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, and Peterson, the editors describe several interlocking components of what they call a social justice classroom. They argue that the curriculum and classroom practice must be:

- Grounded in the lives of our students
- Critical
- Multicultural, antiracist, pro-justice
- Participatory, experiential
- Hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary
- Activist
- Academically rigorous
- Culturally sensitive

