

## Illustration of How Green Literacy Commentaries Support Teachers

To illustrate how our commentaries support teachers, we offer a sample commentary, which is exemplary of the ones found in *The Green Literacy Handbook*. This example of our commentaries is about a single text, Molly Bang's (1997) picture book, *Common Ground: The Water, Earth, and Air We Share*. We chose this example because even though *Common Ground* is a singular book, the theme is comprehensive and focuses on common natural resources that are shared by many and often polluted by a few. We provide context with a third-grade vignette showing how Albert, the teacher, used this commentary with his classroom.

### COMMENTARY ON COMMON GROUND

*Common Ground* by Molly Bang (1997) gives credit for the inspiration for the book to Garrett Hardin's (1968) seminal paper, "The Tragedy of the Commons," published in *Science* magazine. Hardin's paper puts forth in a striking manner the problem faced by a group of New England landowners in managing the town commons. The commons provided grazing land for each landowner's sheep, but the number of sheep grazed needed to be limited or the grass would be ruined, destroying it for future use. As it is in the interest of each property owner to graze as many sheep as possible, the result if the dilemma is unresolved will lead to the "tragedy" of the destruction of the common resource. Drawing from this big idea of Hardin's, the picture book *Common Ground* introduces young readers to this concept of the commons, which is so central to our environmental dilemmas.

Through illustration and text, the book begins with the idea of the New England landowners sharing grazing land. *Common Ground* then uses this concept to demonstrate how people and businesses benefit from the easy availability of oil, gas, and coal as fuel and to make products, and the seeming abundance of water for all our needs, at least in the short run. Bang (1997) then writes:

But someday, these fossil fuels will be used up. . . . Over time, the wells run dry, and the wastes pollute the water. There is not enough clean water for all the people, the farms, and the businesses. Fresh water, fossil fuels, forest, fish—one by one, we are destroying the natural resources that sustain our lives.  
(pp. 29, 32–33)

The book shows how the water, earth, and air we share are endangered, and unless the predicament of overuse of these environmental resources is resolved by society, they will no longer be available. We think a good question that propels critical thinking concerning this issue is, What should we keep and preserve for the common good and what should be made private and for profit? Each person, rich and poor, needs air to breathe, water to drink and bathe in, food to eat, and some form of energy to move about. For example, consider, can someone own the air we all breathe? Can anyone fish in the ocean or should someone own it?

Using this commentary about *Common Ground* as support, a third-grade inclusion teacher, Albert, began to think about ways to engage his students in understanding the big-picture idea of the commons. Since he was not an environmental scientist, nor had he much experience with teaching

the concept of the commons, this commentary instilled in him confidence to begin teaching about the commons to his students. After reading the commentary, Albert was motivated to do his own research on the topic of the commons. He found Hardin's (1968) scientific paper, which he found difficult to read, but he was captivated by reviews of the ideas the paper expresses. After considering the importance of the idea of the commons, Albert located and mapped out local examples of commons near his school, such as a park and the public school he taught in, so he could share them with students. Albert contemplated what he thought as appropriate to have as common spaces and other spaces to have as private. For example, Albert recognized a nearby lake was used in common for swimming, boating, and even for his community's water supply. He also thought about how he and his family owned their home on the lake, which included private beach access.

## EXPLORING THE COMMONS IN A THIRD-GRADE VIGNETTE

Before reading the book *Common Ground: The Water, Earth, and Air We Share* by Molly Bang (1997) aloud to his students, Albert wanted them to be aware of the concept of common ground; he planned two consecutive days for discussion before reading the book aloud. During the first discussion, the students wavered in their understanding about common ground and the importance of preserving their environment. Many could not articulate what common ground looked like. One student commented that common ground belonged "everywhere but nowhere." Along with the rest of her classmates, she had heard the word pollution and said, "Smoking stinks!" but did not connect how pollution played a big factor in her urban life or in the preservation of the commons. The second day's discussion began with brainstorming items that could be shared in their homes, their classroom, their school, and their neighborhoods. The students offered several suggestions, including shared sidewalks and a shared courtyard at an apartment complex. While students came up with examples of shared resources, Albert emphasized the idea of sharing and supporting resources for the *common ground*. The concept began to click in the students' minds. They could understand the need for a shared, common supply of pencils available when a student needed one. With Albert's guidance, the students came up with other examples of sharing toys and books as well as the streets and drinking fountains outside. One student came up with the idea, "Common ground must be like a park. Everyone can go there and no one owns it."

For the third and final day's discussion, Albert read aloud *Common Ground*. The class debated the importance of taking care of their shared or common environment and the implications of pollution in their homes, classrooms, and school. Another discussion took place. A student remembered being at the park where a strong smell came from water in a small pond. The water was green and slimy. The student shared, "That pond isn't for the common good! Nobody can use it!" This response led the way for other students to consider how commons can be polluted by the few while affecting the many.

After the discussion, Albert asked them to come up with ideas to preserve the commons in their school. Students came up with concepts like putting up a "No littering" sign in the cafeteria to preserve their dining environment for the common good. The students also decided to talk to the school principal before putting up the sign in the cafeteria and received her support; in this way they worked with the school's power structure. The commentary on the book *Common Ground* empowered Albert to move his third graders to consider the importance of the commons and to take action by working with the school's power structure. This kind of action taken by Albert's students is an outgrowth of a Green Literacy dialogue that we hope will occur.

## REFERENCES

- Bang, M. (1997). *Common ground: The water, earth, and air we share*. Blue Sky Press.
- Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science*, 162(3859), 1243-1248.