

Preface

We created this book to share our learning experiences with elementary students and their teachers in a project called Powerful Voices for Kids. You might be wondering: What does it mean, actually, for someone to have a powerful voice? Is this a book about public speaking? How might the world be better off if children—and by extension, all people—were able to use language and other symbol systems to express themselves effectively to address family, peers, neighbors, and members of the global society?

Actually, this book *will* help you craft activities to enable students to become better public speakers. But more important, it is a book about literacy in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the term: literacy as the sharing of meaning through symbols. Today people use a wide variety of symbols to communicate, including images, language, sound, and multimedia. So the phrase “powerful voices for children” is a metaphor for inspiring children and young people to use these symbols effectively to become engaged and active learners, listeners, leaders, and citizens.

Learning to share meaning is the art of being human. Growing up in a culture rich with symbols, children and young people face enormous challenges in sorting through the many complex messages that they receive each day. Children have so many choices available to them—books, TV, video games, music, movies, the Internet, and social media. In everyday life, with our friends and family, we all struggle sometimes with expressing ourselves appropriately. Being a responsible communicator means coming to terms with our relationships with others and with the role of popular culture, digital technologies, and mass media in our lives.

You may be a classroom teacher, a principal, a parent, a school library media specialist, a concerned professional, a researcher, an independent media artist, or a student. You may be interested in making a difference in urban education, as we are. You may value creative projects that bring children together with civic leaders, artists, writers, media makers, and

community activists. If you're like us, you're attracted to collaborations that connect people with different types of skills across different types of institutions.

You may simply love children and want to support their development by providing immersive, hands-on experiences that help them build critical thinking skills that connect the classroom with contemporary culture. You may be curious about how to use children's interest in digital technologies, mass media, and popular culture to support learning through creative and collaborative play in either formal contexts (like K–6 schools) or informal settings (like summer camps or afterschool programs). You may have broader questions about the consequences of linking the worlds of mass media and popular culture with the practice of learning and teaching.

We don't have all the answers, of course. But in this book, we'll share our process of discovery, revealing what we have learned from working with young children and their teachers. We have helped hundreds of elementary educators "teach the media" to their students. Read on to learn a variety of practical strategies for strengthening children's abilities to think for themselves, communicate effectively using language and technology tools, and use their powerful voices to contribute to the quality of life in their families, their schools, their communities, and the world.

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Chicago, IL

About the Authors



Renee Hobbs is one of the nation's leading authorities on digital and media literacy education. She spearheaded the development of an online journal and national organization to support the work of media literacy educators and scholars. At the Media Education Lab (www.mediaeducationlab.com), she creates videos, websites, digital games, and multimedia curriculum materials for K–12 educators. She offers professional development programs to educators in school districts across the United

States and around the world, and her research has been published in more than 50 scholarly and professional books and journals. She is the founding director of the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island. Renee enjoys sharing ideas and learning via Twitter—you can follow her online @reneehobbs.



David Cooper Moore is the program director for Powerful Voices for Kids. He teaches courses in media production at Temple University's School of Media and Communication and has also developed media literacy projects and productions with PBS Teachers, the Center for Social Media, Drug Free PA, and the Girl Scouts of America on topics including digital citizenship and civic responsibility, public health, and fair use in K–12 education. David worked with

Media Education Lab on videos and curricula for the PBS Elections 2008 curriculum, *Access, Analyze, Act: A Blueprint for 21st Century Civic Engagement*. He blogs on education, media, and technology issues at DavidCooperMoore.com. and is on Twitter @dcoopermoore.