

## **Using Everyday Issues and Everyday Texts To Negotiate Critical Literacies with Young Children**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper the author shows and tells what happened when together with her three to five-year-old students she seized opportunities to use everyday issues and every day texts from the school and community to negotiate a critical literacy curriculum over the course of a school year. To do this the author describes in detail, and analyzes, a particular critical literacy incident that took place in the classroom.

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### **Constructing Spaces for Critical Literacy**

A critical literacy curriculum needs to be lived. It arises from the social and political conditions that unfold in communities in which we live. As such it cannot be traditionally taught. In other words, as teachers we need to incorporate a critical perspective into our everyday lives in order to find ways to help children understand the social and political issues around them.

Working from a critical perspective, my desire is to construct spaces where social justice issues can be raised and a critical curriculum can be negotiated with children. Critical literacy makes it possible for me to reconsider my thinking by providing a framework from which to address issues of social justice and equity. I imagine

negotiation and contestation at the center of these discussions rather than a more familiar process of discovering ‘the’ best way. I envision learning as a process of adjusting and reconstructing what we know rather than of accumulating information.

Shortly I propose to show and tell what happened when my three to five-year-old students and I seized opportunities to use everyday issues and every day texts from our school and community to negotiate a critical literacy curriculum over the course of a school year. To do this I will describe in detail and analyze a particular critical literacy incident that took place in our classroom. First, I want to provide some context for talking about our experiences by outlining briefly a study in which I attempted to put a critical literacy curriculum in place, and explaining my use of an audit trail to document and analyze this curriculum as well as to initiate critical conversation with young children.

## **ABOUT THE STUDY**

The study took place in a half-day junior kindergarten<sup>i</sup> classroom where I worked with sixteen 3-to 5-year-old children who were representative of the diverse multiethnic community in what was known to be a middle-class neighborhood<sup>ii</sup>. In our class there were nine ethnicities represented. There were seven boys and nine girls. Four of the boys were third generation Canadian; one of the boys was Hispanic and the other Filipino. Of the nine girls, two were third generation Canadian, two were second generation Canadian, one was English West Indian, one was Italian Canadian, another was Maltese Canadian, one was Portuguese, one was Polish and one was Chinese. Five of the students in the class were from single child homes or were the oldest of their siblings. The other eleven children had one or two older siblings. Eight of the children

were three when the school year began and the other eight were four. By the end of the year half of the class had turned four and the other half had turned five. Our class was a half-day morning junior kindergarten and our school day was 8:45-11:15.

I focused on using the issues from the social lives of children to construct and sustain a critical curriculum. My inquiry stretched over the course of a school year. The primary source of data production was an *audit trail* that I co-created with my students. An audit trail is a public display of artifacts gathered by a researcher that represents their thinking. It is meant to be visible not only to the people in a classroom community but others in the school community as well. (Harste and Vasquez, 1998). The children and I researched our world together and produced data together in the form of an audit trail which was displayed on a bulletin board covered with artifacts of learning such as photographs, letters, book covers, and transcripts of conversations. (See Figure 1)

**Figure 1 – Our Class Audit Trail/ Learning Wall**





To analyze the data, I revisited field notes and observations. I then identified key incidents that were catalysts for examining classroom practice. From there, I highlighted patterns and anomalies in order to identify issues, themes, and ideas.

Analysis of the data was guided by the following key questions:

- What can be learned from a classroom where cultural and social issues raised by children are taken up as curriculum?
- How are social critique, social analysis, and social action used to construct literacy?
- What complexities are involved with engaging in critical literacy practice?
- How are different meanings negotiated through changing constructions of literacy practice?

Throughout data analysis I made use of a number of theoretical tools. I began with a social constructivist view to support my discussion about envisioning literacy from a critical literacy perspective. What this afforded me was a space to "recognize that we use

a multiplicity of literacies to get things done in our lives." (Comber and Cormack, 1997) Further, through this perspective, learning is not seen as a linear transformation of mental structures. Rather, learning is viewed as mediated through social and cultural activities dealing with "situated changes in sociocognitive actions in children's ways of participating" in the world (Dyson, 1995). Sociocultural theory, therefore, highlighted social relationships in the research classroom. What this theory did not reveal is the hierarchy of social relationships. For this, I assumed a poststructuralist perspective through the work of Michel Foucault. From this perspective, the self is situated within discourse communities that carry different forms of power, sometimes complementing one another, at other times conflicting with one another. However, as Anne Haas Dyson notes, the self can easily be lost within what has come to be known in the poststructuralist world as a discourse grid, that is, a grid of identities of who one can and cannot be and what one can and cannot do in particular communities (Dyson, 1995).

In Bakhtin's view, the self is situated in an interactional and ideological world (Bakhtin, 1981). Within this world, the self is actualized through the construction of dialogic relationships. While engaged in these dialogic relationships, we borrow each other's words, using them to inform and push our own thinking and learning. According to Bakhtin, these relationships are mediated by language as we engage with texts, whether oral, written, or some other form. It is through the building of these dialogic human relationships that we learn to participate in community.

In combination, these theoretical tools situate literacy away from a traditional skill and practice model that positions it as an internal, psychological act, toward a view of literacy as social and cultural practice. Further, work in the field of critical literacy in

practice provided me with an overarching frame of reference for analyzing the data and gaining insight into negotiating and constructing critical literacies with young children (Comber, 1993, Davies, 1993, Maras and Brummet, 1995, Morgan, 1997, Comber and Kamler, 1997).

## **DEFINING CRITICAL LITERACY**

Colin Lankshear writes that being critical is currently in vogue (Lankshear, 1997). Barbara Comber notes that critical literacy has been "conference, curriculum, policy and journal currency for some time now." (Comber, 1993) As critical literacy gains momentum in the field of education, different definitions are attached to it, often describing what critical literacy does. For example, Allan Luke talks about challenging texts -- making visible selective versions of the world that are told to change conditions of living (Luke, 1994). Ira Shor talks about critical literacy as analytical thinking, reading, writing, speaking, or discussing (Shor, 1992). Patrick Shannon claims that critical literacy content ought to stem from participants' lives and that the process should involve questions that stem from participants' lives as a springboard for dialogue (Shannon, 1995). Anne Simpson talks about helping children to become conscious of how texts act upon them (Simpson, 1996).

There exists a growing body of critical literacy demonstrations of practice with older students. However, there is very little written by preschool or elementary teachers about exploring critical literacy with their students. Those demonstrations that do exist take the form of isolated incidents where students are not involved in negotiating or constructing curriculum. In this paper I propose to illustrate what critical literacy allowed

my students and me to do differently and to demonstrate the central role that critical literacy plays in shaping literacies constructed through classroom practice. As a result, I hope to open up spaces in which to rethink curriculum as a metaphor for the lives learners want to live and the people they want to be.

For the purposes of my research, I made use of Barbara Comber's definition of critical literacy as opportunities to consider what we do with reading and writing and what reading and writing do to us (Comber, 1993).

### **Audit Trail as a Tool for Generating And Circulating Meaning**

Retracing thinking involves theorizing. As my students and I began constructing the audit trail, I thought about using it as a tool for critical conversation with them. It seemed to me that making theoretical connections visible using artifacts might enable my students to revisit, reread, analyze and re-imagine possibilities for living a critically literate life. I also imagined that the audit trail could be a tool for building curriculum.

The children referred to the audit trail as The Learning Wall because they said the wall was all about their learning. Throughout this paper I will use the terms audit trail and learning wall interchangeably. Artifacts included photographs, book covers, posters, newspaper clippings, magazine ads, transcripts of conversations, a stuffed toy and internet printouts representing our theories of the world about things that mattered to us. Each of the artifacts became a way for us to make visible the incidents that caused us to want to learn, the issues we had critical conversations about and the actions we took to

resist being dominated and to reposition ourselves within our community. The audit trail became our demonstration of and our site for building a critical curriculum for ourselves.

Over the course of the school year the children regularly referred to various artifacts on the audit trail, often pointing to the artifacts that were posted. Issues recorded on the audit trail generated curriculum topics including, rainforests, the environment, gender, fairness, the media, and a range of questions concerned with power and control. Over a period of 10 months various issues were sustained and continuously revisited.

### **A Closer Look At Our Audit Trail: How We Got Started**

On the first day of school, I decided to read *Quick as a Cricket*, by Don and Audrey Wood, because the predictable text would make it possible for the children to read with me. While reading, the children paused and began to raise questions about one particular illustration of an amphibian. One of the children asked, "Is that a frog or a toad?" This question led to research about where frogs and toads live. The children discovered that some frogs and toads live in rainforests. They also discovered that some frogs and toads are in danger of extinction because of the clearing of certain rainforests for various reasons, including urban expansion. Their discovery led to inquiries about the rainforest and ways of taking action to save rainforests and endangered animals, which marked the beginning of a curriculum about social justice, equity, and environmental issues that lasted throughout the school year. The first artifacts were chosen to represent these initial inquiries.

Other sections of our audit trail represented various instances of learning whereby my students and I engaged in critical analysis of text, constructing alternative versions of

text or engaging in social action. The following section focuses on a particular project represented on our audit trail.

### **A Closer Look At An Instance of Critical Literacy Represented On Our Audit Trail: Women And Girls Are Strong Too**

One day a flyer arrived at our school regarding a contest for International Women's Day. The contest involved creating a bookmark and slogan that represents women. Interest in women's rights and gender had been sustained from earlier conversations during our exploration into environmental issues and rainforests. A group of four girls wanted to know more about the contest so we put in a call to the organizers, a committee of teachers and administrators interested in supporting equity for women. We found that the contest had been going on for a number of years. We were told that a majority of the entries previously submitted had come from older students in middle school or high school. This information generated a discussion regarding ways in which kindergarten and especially junior kindergarten students are marginalized and left out of school events. At the time my students had already engaged in a series of social action projects using tools such as petitions and surveys. The discussion gave rise to a conversation on the inequitable access that junior kindergarten students have to various school functions and special events. As a result, a group of four girls made it their social equity project to enter the contest and design a bookmark. (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2 – Image Designed for the Book Mark**



*The image portrays three females doing what the girls described as ‘powerful things that usually people say boys do’.*

*The character with the ‘S’ on her chest and the red cape is ‘superwoman’ the counterpart and equal to ‘superman’. The brown rectangular shape represents a building. Underneath the building is a smallish figure symbolizing how even young girls can do powerful things.*

*Together with this image the girls came up with a slogan “Women and Girls are Strong Too”.*

While working on the bookmark the girls engaged in a series of conversations regarding what words to use to describe the bookmark and what images to use to best convey their message that “Women and girls are strong too”. When I asked them what they meant they replied with “it means girls should have chances like boys do”, and “lots of times girls can do things that other people think they can’t because they aren’t strong enough or they are too scared”.

During the next few weeks the class anxiously awaited the results of the contest. At the end of the third week an envelope arrived addressed to our class. Angela and Maria who had submitted the entry on our behalf opened the envelope. They had won. For the first time in the contest’s history junior kindergarten students had entered and won!

In a letter attached to the winner's certificate, the organizers of the event revealed that they were caught off guard by receiving an entry from a junior kindergarten class that at first they were not sure what to do with the entry. In the end they decided to award two winners, one from younger students and the other from older students. We had opened the organizer's eyes to the fact that although the language used in the contest flyer suggested that entries would be accepted from all grades that in fact 'all' really meant older children. Junior kindergarten's submitting an entry led them to re-think their practice.

During the next school assembly, an anomalous event took place as Angela and Maria accepted an award of recognition on behalf of our class in front of the whole school. This became one of the events that eventually resulted in including junior kindergarten students in more school activities. This kind of action also encouraged the school PTA to take up our cause and fight for the rights of junior kindergarten students to have equitable access to school events and functions.

## **DISCUSSION**

In the classroom I shared with my junior kindergarten students, literacy was predominantly seen as social transformation, where issues raised were acted upon to effect change. In our immediate community, junior kindergarten students were given more and more access to school events; beyond our immediate community, the children began to raise similar issues of equity and social justice in their homes. This was evident as we engaged in projects such as the International Women's Day contest. Instructional pedagogy was rooted in questioning, contesting, and offering different perspectives in order to change inequitable or unjust situations. Spaces were created to question, contest,

and interrogate social texts throughout the school day in class meetings, in small-group conversations, and in different areas of the classroom. Issues of social justice and equity were highlighted throughout the school year. These issues were used to negotiate and sustain the curriculum, as well as to generate other possible curricular engagements.

As I became more experienced in engaging in critical literacies, I became better at constructing a curriculum based on the social justice and equity issues raised by my students' life texts - stories they brought into the classroom. I became more comfortable negotiating the curriculum with children and constructing a curriculum with them.

According to Luke and Freebody, literacy should be a "moral, political, and cultural decision about the kind of literate practices that are needed to enhance people's agency over their life trajectories." (Luke and Freebody, 1999) When curriculum is negotiated using the social worlds of children, learning is sustained and generative. The generative quality comes from giving children opportunities to connect their current understandings with other issues that arise or with the stories of their peers. The negotiation of curriculum is not new, especially to progressive educators, such as whole language practitioners. What is different is the use of social justice and equity issues framed from a critical literacy perspective that leads to various forms of social action. Through this study, I became witness to the possibilities for very young children to effect change.

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<sup>i</sup> In Ontario some school boards offer elementary schooling beginning with what is called Junior Kindergarten. Junior Kindergarten students, often referred to as pre-school aged children in the USA, are required to be four years old by December 31 of the academic year for which they are registering. School attendance is not mandatory until age six or first grade. Junior Kindergarten is considered an elective year.

<sup>ii</sup> The school is publicly funded and located in what is considered a middle class neighborhood in a suburb of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Most of the homes in the vicinity of the school are single home dwellings. This description is deceiving because there are a number of dual family homes or homes where extended family members live together. Also, at the time of this research Ontario was experiencing severe job cutbacks which affected many families in the school.