

This article is taken from the Rethinking Childhood Series book: Quintero, E. P. (2009). *Critical Literacy in Early Childhood Education*. NY: Peter Lang. The book documents qualitative research with teacher education students and practicing teachers. Integrating traditional content, the arts, and cross-disciplinary ways of knowing, curriculum is framed around critical literacy. The specific text reprinted here addresses transformative actions by preschool children and their teachers. The reader is referred to the complete book for discussions of literary connections with others, constructing meaning through language, and supporting critical reading.

Complicated Conversations; Artful Story as a Frame for Activist Work

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In a study of cases of activist teachers, Casey (1993) found that teaching is much more than being employed in a school. Teachers, both in- and outside the classroom, have the power to change their students' lives. And these teachers understand that children have the power to change their own lives. Through my research I have strengthened my belief that teaching practice of effective educators is an interrelationship of life's activities and priorities both inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, children—regardless of age—when given an environment of support and acceptance become experts at activism in their own worlds inside and outside the classroom.

In a study of effective literacy teachers mentioned earlier (Rummel & Quintero, 1997) we found that teachers bring past experiences and present values and priorities to the schools. Teachers' beliefs and their life experiences cannot be separated from what they do in the classroom. These teachers reflect the observations of Daniel Berrigan (1999): "If we are in one aspect of human struggle we are in the whole thing. Touching human life in one way, we touch all of life" (p. 37). A director in a Head Start program in Southern California that serves one of the most economically challenged neighborhoods in the state continually works, along with the teachers in her program, to observe and build relationship with families and children in order to continually make the program more responsive to the needs of the children. For example, she told the story of a particular child in the program the previous year who came to the program in

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September shortly after his family had come to the area from Mexico. In spite of the supportive, flexible, and child-friendly environment, the boy just couldn't acclimate. She said he just couldn't sit or stay still for any reason—not even to play with blocks or toy cars, or to paint, or to play with the water in the water table. He only seemed calm and only played with the other children when he was outdoors. So, after a few days of this mutual struggle, the director and teachers decided to experiment with moving many of the classroom activities outside 162 Critical Literacy in Early Childhood Education (she smiled and said, “an advantage to being in Southern California”). She said the change in the child was immediate and profound. He was calm and apparently happy. He experimented with virtually every type of activity provided, and he began to make friends and collaborate with other children on work and in play.

The director then explained that they continued this setup for a few weeks and then gradually moved a few activities back inside, little by little, and the child adjusted to the indoor classroom. In the meantime, she made a home visit (a vital component of Head Start programs) to talk with the family to get to know them and to explore other needed support. What she learned there explained the probable reason for the child's inability to stay indoors at first. His family had recently moved from Mexico and had joined two other families who all lived in a one-room apartment that had not one window. He needed to be outdoors. He needed his activist teachers who through observation, trust in the children and themselves, and risk-taking confidence changed their program to accommodate him. Activism.

Transformative Action by Preschool Children and Their Teachers

A group of pre-K student teachers, working with three- to five-year-olds (many of whom are Spanish-speaking English Learners) in Southern California and studying in a university class focusing on young children's learning and multilingual language acquisition and English language development in the classroom, created groundbreaking learning situations. These experienced student teachers engaged in critical literacy work that supports children's play, fantasy, and learning through story. They worked on the difficult but effective task of creating participatory curriculum that leads to learners' transformative actions. Embedded in the few examples here are illustrations of the teachers' transformative action as well as the young children's transformative action.

One student teacher working with three- and four-year-olds explained, “It all began with Book 20 from *Ada and Campoy's* (2003) *Authors in the Classroom*.

This is the activity called “How It Is and How It Could Be”(Quintero, 2009, p. 7). The activity encourages teachers to think first about something that one would like to change or make a difference in, and then encourages them to use this idea as a beginning or a catalyst for making change on a personal level. Then, the authors of the book and teachers in the class worked on transferring this idea to the teachers’ work with children. This particular student teacher thought about her membership in the Union of Concerned Scientists that lobbies for environmental issues. She Artful Story as a Frame for Activist Work 163 wanted to do something that deals with being proactive in preventing water pollution. So she planned a thematic lesson that centered on their class pet fish and its water conditions. She and the children did observations dictation, oral discussions, writings, drawings, and finger plays. She used visuals and activities to demonstrate how we could make a change in how we care for and conserve our water sources. They practiced conserving water when washing their hands and picked up trash on their playground. Over the course of three weeks, the children were given a variety of activities and opportunities in English and Spanish with a great deal of consideration given to the conversational and contextual learning surrounding the clean water theme.

Finally, using a digital camera to take pictures of the pet fish and his water, both clean and unclean and by group dictation, the student teacher and her class created a class book in English and Spanish that told the story of Jack the fish that she had invented. The book documented the original clean water Jack had, how his water became dirty (unintentionally), how they cleaned the water, and then quickly learned to use dip sticks to check the water for safety for Jack. The book then addressed the “bigger problem” of dirty water and pollution in our communities, oceans, and world.

We can test our water and even add special drops to clean our water. But remember that even clean looking water can still be dirty. The water cycle cannot clean all of the Earth’s water so we have to help keep our oceans, lakes and rivers clean. (Quintero, 2009, p. 9)

The last page of the book is a list of brainstorming ideas that the preschool children came up with which showed that they understood the small steps (and big responsibility) each person has in preventing pollution.

The student teacher explained:

During my group instruction and throughout the implementation of the clean water theme, there was always a balance of English and English Learner students. While I do not have a bilingual program (officially) at work in my classroom, students do receive much of their instruction during the day in both Spanish and English. I provide the students instruction in fluent Spanish with the use of Spanish-speaking parents or my Americorp assistant. Otherwise, I incorporate as much Spanish as I can speak during the day. I read books in Spanish and encourage the students to speak in whatever language that is most comfortable for them.

She goes on to explain:

I work in a preschool classroom on an elementary school campus with a population of 90% Latino children. My personal goals are to further incorporate optimizing language input that is comprehensible, interesting, and of sufficient quantity, as well as providing opportunities for output, to use languages other than English (Spanish, 164 Critical Literacy in Early Childhood Education in my case) 50% to 90% of the time, and to create a bilingual environment where development of the native language is encouraged. All children deserve to become bilingual and biliterate without the legislation prohibiting this fundamental right to a fair and adequate education.

By implementing lessons based on a theme, I was able to facilitate content learning. I began with a preview in their native language, a continuation in the target language (English), and then a review in the primary language again. I provided opportunities for language development, interaction with print-rich materials such as books, dictation, children's drawings, maps. We practiced expressive language skills via open discussions.

Culturally, many of the children live with other families in small, one-bedroom apartments; most of the apartments do not have a community swimming pool. When we discussed uses of water, I found that most of the children would describe the small, round plastic pools as their swimming pool. Also some of the children were able to describe trips to the beach. Some children described a small patio of plants and chairs, while others do have a front yard and a backyard. This was an awesome conversation for me and the children had a lot to say. I think that they all got the idea that the places that they live are all very similar and maybe they even connected with a sense of community.

Through the means of my clean water theme, I focused on giving the three year-olds as much instruction in Spanish as possible. My focus shifted from what I needed them to do (speak English) to trying to meet their needs of gaining a better foundation in their primary language. Further reflecting on her own transformative action she said, I did take Spanish courses at the Community College and here at the university. I am just beginning to grasp the language, and even though I have a long way to go, I can effectively communicate with Spanish speakers. Not having those skills the first year I taught was difficult, and I was focused on my own learning of a second language. This gave me insight into what the children were experiencing, and I connected with them on that level.

My future hopes on a large scale are to continue to try and learn Spanish by taking Spanish classes at the university, create bilingual and biliteracy activities, while strengthening my skills as an early childhood teacher. I know that I will continue to cultivate the ideologies of cross-cultural awareness among students, parents, and co-workers in my future work with bilingual children. Last but not least, I myself will defend the rights of all children and their right to an above standard education.

The Fat Boy and His Activism

In one university class, as we were discussing transformative action, a teacher reported a crisis in her preschool class. A four-year-old girl came running over to the her. The girl was visibly upset, her face tense and fists clenched. “The fat boy took the truck from me!” Within seconds, the boy, dragging the truck, rushed over to where they were talking, and through his sobs, began trying to explain. The student teacher asked, “What happened?” (She reported being a little surprised that he was so upset because he did have the coveted truck.) The boy stammered, “She c...ca ... called me ... The Fat Boy!” The student teacher turned to the girl and asked, “Is that what you called him?” “Yes,” she said. “Why?” “I don’t know his name.”

The student teacher focused on both children and asked, “What do you think we could do about this?” The girl immediately said, “Make a book.” “Yes?” The teacher wasn’t sure what she was planning. “Yes, we’ll take pictures of everybody and put names on the pictures.” So, the girl and boy together set off with the class digital camera and took pictures of each child in the class. The teacher printed the photos and then the bookmakers asked each child to write

her/his name under his/her picture. Then, after a trip to the processing shop to laminate the pages and bind the book, the class had a book so no one had to use derogatory names for children because they didn't know their real names (Quintero, 2009).

A teacher wrote to me about how her using this methodology of critical literacy with preschoolers in her program promoted important transformative action for one of the children. When I was in your curriculum class I was teaching at a Head Start in Harlem. I'm still there and have been using the problem posing approach with the children. The interaction is so dynamic and meaningful for the children and myself (it's great).

Anyway, I wanted to share with you how the problem-posing approach (adapted for preschoolers, of course) has affected one of my students. This child is four years old. She is an English Language Learner who was diagnosed at the age of three as a selective mute. When classes began in September she barely used language. She didn't say good morning, didn't participate in activities or engage with students. The problem-posing approach with books she can relate to like Dora, for example, have been a vehicle in allowing her to express herself verbally. She has blossomed! I'm amazed (Quintero, 2009, p. 8).

Writing and reading are transforming. As children read and write, they change. A child's writing can tell us much about her/his personal, family, and community contexts. It is a way of nurturing the ability to summon up an "as if," as Maxine Greene (1992) calls it, a sense of "what is out there, what I can reach if I try." It is a way of doing what Maxine Greene suggests, "helping students find language to bring dreams into being, language that introduces them to the experience of going beyond." Education must support students to become effective writers, readers, and participants in literacy.

Deep understanding of the assumption that words, deeds, policy, practice, and theoretical application are inseparably linked in our world today underlies this book. We cannot pretend that teaching is neutral, nor can the practice be done in isolation. Freire (1998) states in his last published work, There are times when I fear that someone reading this...may think that there is now no place among us for the dreamer and the believer in utopia. Yet, what I have been saying up to now is now the stuff of inconsequential dreamers. It has to do with the very nature of men and women as makers and dreamers of history and not simply as casualties of an a priori vision of the world (p. 121).

Children and Activism through Critical Literacy

Other teachers and student teachers are quickly able to see the power of young children's imaginations and fantasy play encouraged by using critical literacy in the curriculum. One student teacher built upon children's interests by asking them first to draw a picture of a scene from one of their favorite storybooks. She then read the classic fairytale *The Three Little Pigs*. After the story she explained to the children that sometimes stories have special messages to teach to people. She led a brainstorming session with her group of children about what messages they thought *The Three Little Pigs* might have. Then she asked the students to show the pictures they had just drawn. She and the children briefly discussed the stories, why they were favorites and what, if any, messages could be found within the stories. After some playtime, she brought the group together to investigate the class rules (posted on the walls where the students could see them). Why do we have them? What is the meaning behind each rule? As a class, they voted on one rule. Then, together on a large piece of paper, they weaved this rule into a short story they wrote as a class. Later in the day, she explained to the children that families, like classes, may have their own special rules and beliefs. She asked them to share a rule or belief from their own family (e.g., in my family, we always take our shoes off when we enter the front door) and explain the meaning behind this rule or belief. She asked the students to reflect on this concept and interview their parents and siblings about what they perceive are important family rules. They shared their interview results with the class the following day.

She wrote an evaluation of her lessons:

It was really exciting for the students to hear *The Three Little Pigs* in class. I think it was especially exciting because most of the students were familiar with this book and could be "experts" in predicting and discussing the unfolding of events. It provided a comfortable foundation for the students to explore and discuss morals and school and family rules in depth. Because the students were discussing THEIR favorite storybooks and THEIR family's rules, everyone was the teacher and had something to share with the class. This was particularly relevant and confidence-boosting for my students. So many students came to kindergarten with varying degrees of classroom experience. Some students knew all their ABCs. Some are still learning how to hold pencils. This activity, where

all the students were “experts” “leveled the playing field” and consequently was a great classroom bonding, esteem building activity.

Another student teacher was inspired to address a series of complex classroom, school, and community issues with kindergarteners. She worked in a “high need” pre-K through grade 6 school located in Spanish Harlem.

Eighty-six percent of the students were of Hispanic/Latino background. Of the students, 6.8% immigrated to the United States within the past three years. Of the students, 93.8% received free lunch and in 2002, a staggering 55.6% of the student population was suspended at some time during the school year. The kindergarteners that she worked with were a group of happy, polite five-year-olds. They deferred to their teachers for instructions and rarely questioned what was asked of them. In a parent-teacher conference she observed that the children’s parents were similarly amicable and polite. They asked few questions and agreed with the teacher on all accounts. The student teacher acknowledged that there were language and cultural barriers present but also could not help wondering to what extent the parents felt their input was relevant.

In her journal reflections other questions that arose from this parent conference included:

How often and in what ways does the community use their “voice”? Is there a belief that a person can make a difference within the larger community? What sort of beliefs about “voice” and social empowerment are passed on from parents in this community to their children?

The student teacher decided that she wanted to create lesson plans designed to empower students by giving them a voice and by helping them realize how their input can impact the larger community. Curriculum goals targeted in these lesson plans included those of the Association for Childhood Education International and the National Council of Teachers of English. In essence, the goals of her lesson plans were to be interdisciplinary in nature, integrating critical literacy, mathematical problems, art, and social studies. The lesson plans also provided opportunities for learning and the development of real-life skills within a context that is relevant to the lives of the student. Such real-life skills included learning to work together as a team, resolve conflicts, problem solve, organize and meet time lines, compromise, manage money, and debate ideas.

The student teacher asked the students to listen to a story that has the issue of teamwork as an underlying theme. For the kindergarten students, she used *Mouse Count* by Ellen Stoll Walsh (1995), a story appropriate for children of ages two to six. Ten mice work together to escape from a hungry snake who has trapped them in a jar. A few days later she read *Arthur Makes the Team* by Marc Brown (1998), a story appropriate for children of ages four to eight. Arthur makes the baseball team but has difficulties catching baseballs! His friend, Francine, gives him a hard time until the two friends realize they must work together in order for their team to win. She then discussed with students why the characters in the story were successful in accomplishing their goal. She then asked the students to break up into groups of three and discuss the last time they worked with others. She provided students with a chart of questions to guide their discussion. Questions included: Was the group work a good experience? Why or why not? What did you accomplish as a group? How could the group work have been better? Then, she asked the different groups to summarize what they discussed. As a class, they agreed upon some guidelines for effectively working as a group. They then recorded the guidelines on chart paper.

The next phase of this student teacher's work involved taking the children for a walk around their school. Using clipboards, they recorded their observations and noted the community's strengths and its weaknesses. Students could write or draw to record their information. When they returned to their classroom, the students discussed their findings with the class. The teacher listed the areas of strengths on the board (e.g., a caring, active PTA, a library with lots of resources) and weaknesses (e.g., a need for computers, an unattractive school environment). The large group agreed upon the two most relevant issues and then generated a debate by splitting the class into two teams. One team supported remedying one issue and the other team the other issue. Teams stated the pros and cons of selecting one issue over the other for the duration of ten minutes. The teacher recorded the comments on a T-chart on the board. At the end of the ten minutes, an idea got one point for each pro listed beneath it with one point subtracted for each con listed. The issue with the most points becomes the targeted issue for the class to work on.

Then the kindergarten students broke into committee groups and brainstormed different ways of resolving the problem. One student was the recorder. One student presented the groups' ideas when the class reconvened. Then students voted on the best solution for the identified problem. Students placed three

different votes for what they thought were the three best ideas. As a group, they identified the solution most people were in favor of. Then students were charged with the task of determining the budget needed to carry out the project. For the problem of the need to beautify the school, the students went online to determine the approximate amount and cost of paint needed to revitalize the school walls. Finally, for homework, students brainstormed and researched ways to raise money to remedy the identified problem. For the problem identified as the need to beautify the school, students researched ways of raising the funds to have the walls repainted.

Another student teacher reflected about critical literacy and what children's activism might look like for young children: I am still becoming familiar with the terms and meanings behind problem-posing and critical literacy, however I think I am beginning to understand how to utilize these methods in an educational setting. The notion of using literacy to bring together academics and a child's own personal experience is so helpful when considering how both children and adults learn. Typically, it is much easier to grasp ideas when they are linked to things that one is already familiar with. I feel that critical literacy also has the ability to bring students together when they realize that they share experiences and I have an example of just that to share.

I am currently student teaching in a kindergarten class and was able to attend school on the first day. One little boy T. came into class crying due to the intense nerves of leaving his parents and beginning something very unfamiliar to him. He cried for a while and eventually my cooperating teacher asked some children who appeared to be more comfortable to be T.'s "special friend" for the day. The next day my cooperating teacher read a story called *First Day Jitters* (Danneberg, 2000) to the class. She prefaced the book with a short discussion on feeling nervous to begin kindergarten as well as asking the children what they thought the character was nervous about. After she completed the story she asked the children to give a thumbs up if they felt nervous and T. along with many others raised their thumbs. I noticed the children looking around to see who had their thumb up and the number of raised thumbs grew as each new child felt more comfortable revealing that they too were nervous. She then had the class draw a picture of themselves on the first day of school.

Another student teacher wrote about a child exemplifying transformative action in her literacy development process: At my student teaching placement, there is a girl (S.) who is significantly younger than her kindergarten peers; she will turn

five at the end of November. On their first full day of school, my cooperating teacher (T.) began reading and writing assessments.

During choice time, T. asked S. to write her name. S. slowly picked up her pencil and held it over the paper, but didn't move. She looked up and quietly said, "I can't do it." T. gave S. her name tag to look at and assured her she would help. First, T. asked her to sound out her own name: "What sound does your name begin with?" Together T. and S. sounded out "sssss." Then S. looked at her name tag and then wrote a backward "S" on her paper. As they sounded out each letter, T. pointed to the corresponding letter. They continued in this fashion until S. finished writing her entire name.

A week later, the children were doing a drawing activity and T. also asked them to write their names on their papers when they were done. As I walked around the classroom observing, I noticed S. was telling another girl, "Stop! I can do it. Just let me do it!" She was indignant and determined, as she grabbed her pencil back. I asked what was wrong, and E., the other girl, pointed to the half-erased "S" on S.'s paper and told me, "She's not writing that right! It's backwards!" I told E. to join the rest of the class, who was already seated on the rug for group reading time. I told S. to work with me at another table. S. followed and went right to work. She quietly mumbled to herself, "sssss" and wrote a backwards "S." Then "aaahhh" and wrote an "A." I asked if she needed help. She told me, "No. I can do it." When she was done, she looked at me and beamed. Her expression was of pride and satisfaction. I couldn't be more delighted myself!

Children's Writing as Activism

Much research from many sources documents different strategies for teaching writing and the varying effects of the different approaches. Before strategies and skills can be addressed, especially considering the perspective of critical literacy, research about the writing that "real" writers do must first be considered. How do "real" writers exert their agency? How, through writing, can young children be supported in their agency? This information about poets and authors relates to the potential of young learners, the environments we create for them to work in, and the ways we teach.

It is voice that tells us the self is present in writing. Each writer, child or adult, has a unique voice that she or he opens to, listens to, and speaks from. Elbow (1998) describes writing with voice as writing into which someone has breathed.

Voice, for him, has nothing to do with the words on the page, only with the relationship of the words to the writer. The words contain not just an explicit message, “the sun glints down a pathway of ripples,” but also some kind of implicit message about the condition of the writer (p. 299).

More than speech, a creative writer’s voice is distinct, definable, the combination of what you say and how you say it. Voice has as much to do with individual consciousness as it does with the subject of the writing. Who we are determines what we notice, and these things, patterns, ideas, sounds will be apparent in our writing, whether we are conscious of this or not.

Even when the subject is not the self, the self continues to draw individual reality by its perceptions. We write what we notice, and in the process of writing, notice more, discover more. Our own voices become stronger the closer we come to what’s critically important to us and what unleashes our own emotions. Voice is strong when images are crystal clear. It becomes weaker the farther we are from the subject, or the more we intellectualize or interpret the subject for ourselves or the reader. Voice also has to do with acts of mind—the questioning, sifting, and connecting process of thought. This is different from experience because it has to do with the process of thinking. Student teachers, once they start reflecting on personal history, demonstrate use of the two related senses of voice, the naming of oneself and the naming of the world. This prepares them to work with young learners to do the same.

For example, one student teacher wrote:

I think family is really important. I have always felt a kind of responsibility, as the oldest ... My parents are really reasonable people. My dad lets me explore my aspirations. He has given me everything. He has been so selfless my whole life, raising us, just being there for us, facilitating our education, letting us do things we wanted to do, and letting me travel. I feel like I have to give back and show that to my siblings. So, it’s not only to my parents but also to be respectful to [my siblings]. I really believe that they are individuals and even though they are my little brothers and sisters, I don’t have authority over them. I think I do have a little bit of authority.

There’s an exchange. Just like a teacher has authority. It’s not something you use to your advantage. It’s there so, hopefully, you are a role model and you a mode of support. You give advice when they need it and vice versa ...On the

other hand, she noted that there can be huge variations in the type of family lives and experiences of new refugee and immigrant students.

I worked with Somalian refugee children when I was in high school. They had very little support and their lives were very difficult. They had post traumatic stress from the war. I mean, that's a lot and I can't imagine how loaded that must be for them. Connecting to and writing from one's own voice requires an environment that nurtures the self. A writer must be able to listen and write without immediate judgment, and then afterward bring her or his knowledge of craft to bear on the material. The feedback of others is necessary in this endeavor. Literary friendship and support in the classroom create a kind of "free space" necessary for risk-taking writing in one's true voice.

It has been found that children, with encouragement and acceptance, do gain self-confidence to do their own reading and writing. They will voice their own reality in terms of culture, social issues, and cognitive development when it is valued as a sharing of knowledge (Quintero, 2004). Teachers can create classroom contexts in which all students can use their voices to affirm their social contexts and to create new situations for themselves through writing. The work of Donald Graves (1994) and his colleagues suggests that three conditions are necessary for children to make progress as writers. First, they must be allowed and encouraged to write on topics they really care about, with the expectation that their work will be read seriously for its content.

After all, why should they sustain the effort of writing and revising if they are not personally involved with their topics or do not expect to be read? Second, there is a developmental aspect to writing growth. Children need time and frequent practice to get better at writing. Third, children need sensitive guidance from adults to become good writers.

In cases with young children, a problem-posing approach can enrich and keep the student-centered integrity and provide the scaffolding needed for younger learners. This methodology, with its strong theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, encourages teachers not to limit their teaching to units and lesson plans. It encourages teachers to use as a point of departure the background funds of knowledge the children bring from their lived experience rather than from a written form of normalization. The method encourages integration of the community funds of knowledge, language, and culture with the standard school curricula.

Of course, in order to write, children must read. It is from literature that children can learn how to write, but only if the thinking implicit in the literature and the language strategies used are made clear to them by an insightful teacher. The thinking encouraged by the literature must be related to the children's lives, cultural contexts of their communities, and to the lives of other students around the globe. It is from the words of others that children can learn about the possible worlds they can construct through writing. It is the combination of reading, writing, and personal choice that makes problem- posing effective.

The literacy endeavor in children's writing involves both individual transformations and transformations in context of various groups of people. If we want to encourage children to use language to create new images for themselves in cultural contexts, we need to know how to guide children's voices through reading and writing in expressive genres like fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction. We can teach children to be attuned to the voices of the writers they read and to listen with new ears to their own lives.

Critical Literacy with Two- and Three-Year-Olds: Activism?

A student teacher, experienced in working with young children and herself a member of an ethnic minority group, had a full slate of learnings from a placement in an Early Head Start program. She wrote:

Throughout the course of the term I have realized the power of observation as a preservice teacher whose ultimate goals are to become an autobiographer, citizen, researcher, and educator like of Lucy Sprague Mitchell. A poignant moment during my new found commitment occurred about three weeks ago downtown. Below is an entry from my journal describing that day.

The Early Head Start is located deep in the government housing projects of the Lower East Side and just steps away from tenement houses of the densely populated sub-culture of Chinatown. When I walked into the classroom there were ten Asian toddlers, one African American, two Hispanics (one was the teacher), and one White. What did I discover about schools' environments? They are a microcosm of the neighborhood. These systems make up the society in which children must live and learn.

This environment caused her to immediately reflect upon her own background:

Unfortunately [sic], I have received my education in highly different settings. At my boarding school in Princeton, we were accused of being in a utopian society. Children were handpicked and selected for reasons of alumni legacy, ability to privately pay for the exorbitant cost of tuition, and, for minorities like me, to diversify the elite setting and become symbols of tokenism in a way. We were isolated from the rest of the world while delving into Physics, Art Foundations, and British Novels. Our Headmaster, Board of Trustees, and developers of the Alumni Support System (purely financial) would have argued that education was the equalizing factor in this setting and what is more real than a white upper class girl from Berkeley and an inner-city kid from Brooklyn (me) sitting around a table?

In observing this Early Head Start program, I realized that my high school did not reflect the tensions and struggles of managing a classroom where the kids are closely tied to and are products of their neighborhoods. Although trite: To understand the students one must understand almost every aspect of where they are coming from. Additionally, to sustain copasetic race and race relations, they cannot be taboo in the classroom.

The first day I arrived, the classroom was divided. All of the Asian children were playing with dough at a table with an Asian grandfather volunteer. The other three children were scattered around the room participating in singular activities.

When O., the African American, came over to the table and started to take some dough, one Asian child, N., pushed his hand back and said “NO! DON’T LIKE IT! O. hit him back then slumped away in what seemed to be an ongoing frustration with not understanding N.’s negative response to him participating in the same activity.

I talked to the director of the program later in the day; she revealed that there is an issue with the parents and thus the children of Asian descent with using the same exact phrase. For some reason it has become part of their English vernacular, and has been disruptive in the classroom particularly surrounding race relations.

With children of this age (two and three), they already notice differences between themselves and others and associate whatever negative attachments their parents have with those different people from themselves and bring these

ideas into the classroom. What puzzled me was the teacher's inadequate response. She put both O. and N. in separate corners, a metaphor for what happens downtown.

In my opinion, there should be something done in and about the classroom. Of course, I am not promoting the creation of a utopian society. From experience and readings of Beverly Tatum, I know that this does not work. The classroom should reflect the neighborhoods in which the children come from and live. However, it should be in the form of learning, exploring, and creating a dialogue surrounding these issues and not confirming them. I realized that education is an easier concrete form for social change in the midst of political and economic inequalities.

The story of N. and O. raised a significant question to me as I embark on teaching. What kind of framework could be employed in the classroom (and learning environments of a larger variety) to equalize, engage, and then create a democratic setting to promote critical thinkers and life long learners as to sustain individual, familial, and social awareness? (citizen).

My answer came at ten o'clock that morning, the start time of the music circle. Although, the teacher played generic songs like "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" and "The Wheels on the Bus," the music brought N. and O. out of the corners and onto the rug to actively participate together in listening, singing, and dancing to the tunes. I thought about what music could mean in teaching children about deeper issues at such a critical juncture in their life.

Much research has shown that children under the age of six are more open, accepting, and sensitive to the differences of themselves and others if positively reinforced.

If children are exposed to an active understanding of their own identity, family identity, and their place in the classroom, they can appreciate this same phenomenon in others and their found "whole" knowledge can transcend time and be translated to their adult social/societal perceptions. In simply observing, I stumbled across the significance in early childhood education to learn about culture—to combat against cultural ignorance and civic apathy—and, on music as an active framework in which to do it.

Consequently, this student teacher embarked on research for her problem-posing curriculum assignment so that she could use critical literacy and promote

agency among the children. She found that some programs in Hawaii are bringing together issues of advocacy, culture, and language under an umbrella of music education. Her study of programs in Hawaii confirmed that teachers can provide diverse learning experiences to children through the unique and positive experience of music. But the teachers cannot and should not do this alone. Cooperation between parents, students, and teachers is needed to understand the complex history of culture. Culture involves the way people dress, the language they speak, the foods they eat, and the music they listen to. On a deeper level, however, culture also includes such things as patterns of emotions, ways of interacting with others, conceptions of time and space, gender roles, and childrearing practices.

Critical Literacy in Action—Artful Story as a Frame for Activist Work

Case Study Twenty-One

A student teacher led first graders in a study of famous people from a historical, artistic, and human rights standpoint, while focusing on all aspects of balanced literacy. The children were learning about historically important activists while being activists in their own participation of balanced literacy.

The lesson began with the storybook *Diego* by Jeanette Winter.

Listening:

The student teacher asked the children to think about something they really like to do and do well. She asked questions such as *When do you do this activity and how did you learn to do it?* Then she read the book *Diego* (Winter, 1994).

Dialogue:

They then discussed the activities that *Diego* did and how he expressed himself through art. The student teacher then asked children what ways do they prefer to express themselves?

Action:

The student teacher and the children created a *Diego* Bulletin Board. On this bulletin board the children constantly contributed ideas (mirroring the

chalkboard walls in the story). During Writing Workshop the children wrote about what they had drawn. They had a poetry writing activity, “Where Am I From?/Where’s My Family From?” which involved the children in writing list poems based upon their own lives.

Encyclopedias, magazines, and websites were provided so that the children could investigate art history and history books to learn about context in which Diego Rivera lived and worked. Two of the class’s research questions were Why was his hero Zapata? Why are his murals in various national buildings in Mexico City considered a national treasure?

The student teacher noted in an evaluative reflection:

I learned a lot about young children’s learning by doing a lesson like this one with such young learners. Firstly, I learned new facts as the children were doing their “research” but more importantly, this made me think about how intelligent children are and how so many people underestimate children and their abilities.

Case Study Twenty-Two

A teacher of a dual language pre-K class led her preschoolers in a mini-study of the Chicana activist and author Sandra Cisneros. This teacher believes that four-year-olds can make the connection between identity, family loyalty, and activism on their developmental level of understanding when activities are appropriate.

Listening:

The teacher brought the preschoolers to the rug and explained what a memoir is—a personal/family story. Then she read *Hairs/Pelitos* by Sandra Cisneros (1997) in both English and Spanish.

Dialogue:

As they discussed the story, the students were able to tell her that *Pelitos/ Hairs* was more than just about hair. It was about Sandra's love for her mother and her feeling of safety when with her. The teacher then showed them other works by Sandra Cisneros, *House on Mango Street* (1984) and *Caramelo: Or Pure Cuento: A Novel* (2002). She showed them that she was reading a book by an author that they could read too.

Action:

The teacher had arranged materials so that the students could break up into groups for writing, independent reading, sketching, or language. The language group was any of the students who wanted to read with her on the rug in Spanish. She had a group of five students and they took turns reading *Pelitos/Hairs* (1997) in Spanish and then paraphrasing the meaning. The following day the class did a Readers Theater using *Hairs/Pelitos*.

Case Study Twenty-Three

A student teacher of a preschool class in a diverse, inner-city public school planned her problem-posing around the developmentally appropriate content outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) that she felt was deeply related to critical literacy as activism for young children. These points are as follows:

- The content and desired outcomes are meaningful and important to children's current well-being and later learning.
- Early learning standards are not merely scaled-back versions of standards for older children. Instead, the standards are based on research about the processes, sequences, and long-term outcomes of early learning and development.
- Standards recognize and accommodate variations in children's cultures, languages, communities, and individual characteristics, abilities, and disabilities. This flexibility supports positive outcomes for all children.

She reported:

In my observations I documented important details about the context of the classroom.

First of all, language has a rich and accommodating presence. The wall displays, the charts, word walls, and interactive bulletin boards are prominent and carefully arranged at children's eye level. I found that my cooperating teacher refers to them everyday. Each display demonstrates a clear purpose and includes both illustration and written language. Other signs in the room offer directions for certain tasks. On the first day of school, the children received morning jobs

that include signing in and answering the question of the day, among others. By the end of the first week, my cooperating teacher placed the Morning Jobs sign on the first table. The directions are numbered with a brief imperative sentence and an illustration.

Another sign reminds the children of the steps for using the computer. It has fewer words and bigger pictures. Again, these signs challenge multiple domains. As emergent readers and writers, the illustrations are the first symbols that the children understand. They give information and communicate messages to the children. With exposure and practice, letters and words will become more and more recognizable. The illustrations, therefore, lay a foundation for written language.

Based on what I have learned about the students in my classroom and developmentally appropriate guidelines, I have developed a series of problem-posing activities that will build on the children's knowledge and understanding of their surroundings. I want to explore with the children the role that signs play in their everyday lives. Through my observations, I know that the children recognize symbols to gather information, and that they use various tools, pencils, crayons, markers, fingers, and hands, to make images that give their information. My plans incorporate literacy, math, social studies, and art.

Day One

Listening:

She asked children to listen to *The Signs I See on the Way to K-108* by Jackie Brechbill.

This sign tells me where to go in. (Subway—words)
This sign tells me where to go out. (Exit—words)
This sign tells me when to walk. (Walking man—picture)
This sign tells me when to stop. (Red hand—picture)
This sign tells me the name of the park. (Washington Square Park—words)
This sign tells me the rules of the park. (No bikes, etc.—pictures)
This sign tells me my location. (Street sign, name of boy in class—words)
This sign tells me that I found my way. (Welcome to K-108 words)

The student teacher explained:

In constructing this book, my goal was to make the content more relevant for the children. First, they will recognize my name and realize that an author is not someone far away with no face. Anyone can be an author, including them. Second, I used real photographs in the book. The pictures were taken at the angle from which the children see, low to the ground. Finally, I was sure to use some pictures that the children were sure to recognize.

For instance, the “Welcome to K-108” sign concludes the book by “telling me that I found my way.” Authenticity will make the experience more meaningful. I also included page numbers.

Dialogue:

Then they discussed what they saw. They discussed what signs are, why they are used, and where they are seen. They talked about how some signs use pictures and some use words, how signs are used to give us information, give us directions, and keep us safe. The children added their own thoughts. It is possible to identify the different shapes and colors that are used for signs.

They talked about the use of size in signs. Some signs are very big with big words and/or pictures because they have a very important message, like STOP. Other signs use smaller words because they need to give a lot of information, like parking signs.

Action:

They walked around the block to look for the signs used around the school. When they returned to the classroom, the children had the opportunity to draw what they saw and share their artwork with the class. They displayed the work and made some tally charts of how many children saw a stop sign and how many signs were made with a rectangle. Also, they made a Venn diagram of how many signs that they saw used pictures, how many used words, and how many used both.

Day Two

Listening:

Complicated Conversations - Quintero

They listened again to *The Signs I See on the Way to K-108* by Jackie Brechbill.

Dialogue:

They discussed what they remembered regarding the signs from the walk.

Then the student teacher asked the children whether they recognized any signs from inside the school building. They discussed the purpose for signs in the school and in the classroom.

Action:

They explored the classroom to look for signs. When the children identified a sign, the student teacher asked for the purpose. Some children read the words on the signs and others read the pictures. The children were free to explore in groups, alone, or with adults in the room. After some time, they counted how many signs were in the classroom. They also noted and counted the places in the classroom where adding a sign might be helpful. Again, the children had time to create their own ideas about signs.

Day Three

Dialogue:

They talked about the book and how they saw different signs inside and outside of the classroom and school. The student teacher asked the children whether they wanted to make books for the classroom about the signs they saw. She told them that each of them could add one sign to the book.

Action:

First, the student teacher asked the children to bring her the pictures from what they saw on the walk around the neighborhood. Meanwhile, she put together a Big Book that included the signs they saw around the school, in the school, and in the classroom. She called the children over to help her enter one of their drawings in the book. Each child had one entry and helped the student teacher figure out how to fit their sign in the right category and space.

Listening:

Together, they read their new book.

The student teacher reported about the series of problem-posing activities:

I could see that it was good to build on the strengths of the students who I was planning by including using pictures as cues for gathering information, following directions, and making predictions. They recognize some symbols in language such as exclamation, question and quotation marks and know their purpose. They can identify simple patterns in colors and words. They express awareness of their surroundings, use social skills to articulate thoughts and feelings, and use art and their bodies to communicate early language and literacy skills.

This action became transformative for the children through their own developing literacy.

Case Study Twenty-Four

In a Montessori classroom consisting of learners of ages four to six years old, a problem-posing study of the rainforest was done.

Listening:

The teacher read Moira Butterfield's *Amazon Rainforest* (1992) to begin the study and give the children general information about this and an agenda of topics to be studied

Dialogue:

Then she led a discussion about the book and focused on the Waorani Tribe as she showed photographs and asked children open-ended questions to give the study of the rainforest a human context.

Listening:

After a break of playing outdoors, the teacher read *Who Lives in the Rainforest* by Susan Canizares and Mary Reid (1999) to give the children more information about people living in the rainforest.

Action:

The teacher invited the children to participate in investigations at various child-centered learning stations. One was set up so that the children can create a “rainforest terrarium,” another was a water table with rubber and plastic creatures that inhabit rivers and lakes in the rainforest, another was a “healthy” and “unhealthy” sorting activity that consists of pictures of environmentally safe activities and activities that cause pollution, another was a reading and drawing center with many nature magazines and drawing materials, and another was a center to study cocoons and butterflies. Finally, a writing center became the home for the photographs of the Waorani Tribe.

The class had been discussing the fact that this tribe does not have a writing system, so this center was set up for children to imagine they were members of the tribe and were creating their own writing system.

The teacher reported about part of her analysis of the lessons:

The uniqueness of the multi-age community of the Montessori environment allows the children to help each other communicate and understand one another in the minority language; older children help younger children. Therefore, it is no surprise that there is a strong correlation between social skills and the ability to focus with language learning ability in early childhood. Emotional development and self-control are highly influential on language development. For example, if a child expresses frustration through crying and hitting, rather than using words, other children will be less likely to interact with a child who violates his/her comfort zone. Thus, the child loses potential social interactions that are valuable for his/her language development.

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