CRITICAL LITERACY WITH NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

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“No fair.”
“Why not?”
“Because she said so.”
“Because she’s in charge.”
“But the principal said we can’t go, so we can’t go.”

The opening exchange took place among a small group of students in Carol’s second-grade class. The focus of their conversation was a field trip to the Baltimore Aquarium that had been a long-standing excursion attended by all second graders at the school. Even before second grade, the younger students excitedly anticipated the field trip. However, before the school year started, some of the teachers and the principal decided to cancel the field trip because the funds previously allocated for it were to be spent elsewhere. In the exchange, the students raise the issue of fairness; the principal is in charge, and therefore, if she says no, they cannot go. The students simultaneously create a space to take up issues of power and control in relation to what is fair.

We believe that critical literacies ought to stem from the interests of students: their inquiry questions, things that matter to them, and issues that are on their mind. Issues of fairness are often raised by children (Evans, 2004; Vasquez, 2004) in the way that Carol’s students did in the opening exchange. As such, these moments serve as opportunities for critical literacies.

Here, to provide a backdrop for talking about critical literacy, we explore the work done by a group of students to bring back the trip to the Baltimore Aquarium. First, we define critical literacy and then discuss what has happened in terms of critical literacy practice in the past, return to the aquarium issue, and then talk about where we need to go given the availability of new communication technologies. We also share resources for exploring critical literacy and offer examples of children’s books that can be used as one way to create spaces to do this work.

What Is Critical Literacy?

While defining critical literacy, researchers, literacy educators, theorists, and linguists highlight different issues. For instance, Janks (2010) focuses on the relationship between language and power, and Vasquez (2004) focuses on using the inquiry questions of students to build a critical literacy curriculum. A key tenet of critical literacy is that it should look and sound different in different places. This should be the case if we believe that critical literacy ought to be built around issues of importance to children.

Janks (2010) and Vasquez (2013) talk about what teachers who engage with critical literacy are interested in doing with their students. The following list (Vasquez, 2013) outlines some of these interests. A critical literacy teacher works with students to:

- Identify and name problems and act on those problems regardless of how small or big they might be.
- Offer different ways of taking up critical literacies that makes sense for the project at hand.
- Understand that all texts are socially constructed, and therefore no text is ever neutral.
- Explore what different texts do to readers, viewers, and listeners.
- Unpack whose interests are served by texts.
- Understand the position(s) from which the students read and respond to texts.
- Rewrite themselves and their local situations into a new existence.

In sum, this kind of work results in critical literacies that make a difference in the lives of children.

Through the years, this critical literacy work has taken many different forms. A popular venue has been critically analyzing children’s books (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004; Vasquez, 2010) or critically analyzing everyday texts, such as food packaging or school posters (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, 2004). There has also been work done to redesign problematic texts or to create counternarratives (Marsh, 2005; Vasquez...
Comber (2000) believes children begin school with ideas of what’s fair and what’s not, gleaned from five years of experience with family and community life. From their personal experiences with real and imaginary worlds, they have already developed understandings of how power relations work.

The conversation about not going to the aquarium was passionate and revealing. This was clearly a topic of great interest to the students and one that had importance in their lives. Carol asked the students to specifically state what they wanted. “We want to go to the Baltimore Aquarium,” was their response. She then wrote this response on a piece of chart paper for all to see. She did this because she was worried that some of the students got caught up in the moment and had not really understood the uproar in the room. Some of them seemed to have confused looks on their faces while shaking their fists in the air and shouting, “Yeah, no fair!” As the students read the statement, they nodded in agreement. They then began generating ideas about how they could raise money to bring the trip back to the second graders.

Power comes with roles and titles such as “teacher” and “principal,” especially for young children who come to school with formulated ideas of what school is. Critical literacy practices make visible the unspoken roles of power within a system. Revealing such power affords critical questions such as, Who has power, why do certain people have power, and how can this power be productively navigated to create authentic change? Critical work unfolded as the students sought to better understand why the teachers and principal canceled the field trip and whether this decision could be overturned. Were the teachers and principal being fair to the students when they chose to cancel the trip? Were there ways to involve the students in the decision-making process when the teachers and principal knew the students anticipated the trip from years past?

In the next section, we talk more about the work the students did on the aquarium issue and their use of podcasting as a way to make their work known to others.
What Is a Podcast?
A podcast can be in audio and/or video format. They are often referred to as Internet broadcasts, programs, episodes, or shows that one can download and listen to using a computer or other mobile device, such as an iPod Touch, smartphone, or MP3 player. Podcasts can be downloaded from the Internet and are available by subscription; this is what differentiates a podcast from other audio formats. What this means is that anyone with Internet access can subscribe to a podcast so that when a new episode or show is available, it can automatically be delivered, or fed, to the subscriber’s computer or mobile device. This happens using what is known as Really Simple Syndication, which is a method of electronically pulling (downloading) the shows from the podcast site and storing them in the browser of a computer or mobile device. You can subscribe to podcasts using a digital media player interface, such as iTunes.

CLIP Podcast broadcasts shows on critical literacy, which Vivian hosts. Episodes consist of written scripts focused on research and teaching practice on critical literacy. The “Critical Literacy in Practice (CLIP) Podcasts” sidebar includes some episodes of the podcast that may be of interest to you.

Critical Literacy in Practice (CLIP) Podcasts

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Creating “100% Kids”

One day during a class meeting about whether to become podcaster, Carol had the students listen to different online shows by other children and adults. (The cover photo shows Carol’s students listening to a podcast.) Before long, the students’ curiosity about podcasts led them to want to try this online tool for themselves.

The students decided to focus their show on various ways that they help change inequities in their school and beyond, such as the work they did on the aquarium trip. They wanted the topics to stem from their interests, so they decided to call it “100% Kids” to represent the fact that the topics and issues to be addressed in the show would come from their inquiry questions about the world around them. Figure 1 is the podcast’s banner on their homepage (www.bazmakaz.com/100kids).

Prior to beginning the work on the show, we talked to the students about safety issues while surfing the Internet. We also talked to them about identity issues on the Web, reminding them that in online spaces, people can be whomever they want.

The students wrote their scripts from Monday to Thursday and then recorded the show on Friday. Figure 2 shows the students hard at work writing scripts and physically organizing different segments of
the show prior to recording. Figure 3 is an image of the students listening to a new episode of the show as it aired on Monday morning, and the students in Figure 4 are listening to past episodes.

**We Did It!**

As part of their work to reinstate the beloved school trip, the students surveyed the other second-grade classes to see if those students felt similarly. Having confirmed that the other classes shared the same sentiment, Carol’s students requested a meeting with the school principal and met with her on two occasions. After these meetings, the students realized that if they wanted to go on the trip, they would have to raise the funds themselves. In show 8 (www.bazmakaz.com/100kids/2007/05/15/we-did-it-and-so-can-you_100kids_show8; see Figure 5), the students reflect on the experience and talk about some of the fund-raising work they did, such as selling crafts and pizza, to make the trip to the aquarium a reality not only for themselves but also for the other second-grade classes. Figure 6 is a partial transcript of one segment of the show that refers to this work.

There is no mistaking the pride with which the students talked about their success at fund-raising. For instance, Ben suggests contacting Guinness World Records to record their feat. Lucy talked about working hard, noting she is proud of what they were able to accomplish. By raising enough funds for the entire second grade to go to the aquarium, going on the field trip that particular year had even more significance for all involved than it had in the past.

**“Reading the Word and the World”**

Freire and Macedo (1987) note that when we read the word, we simultaneously read the world. This idea of reading the world is part of a critical lens that can be used to make sense of societal constructs and to challenge dominant ideals of society (Janks, 2000). While creating spaces to unpack the implicit power of texts, framing the curriculum from a critical literacy perspective creates a space for us to consider who the power privileges and who this same power excludes (Janks, 2000). The inequitable distribution of power connotes that readers are positioned differently by texts, just as readers engage with texts by bringing to their readings their diverse past experiences and beliefs (Edelsky, 1999; Lewison et al., 2008).
It is therefore our responsibility as teachers who create such spaces to be there to support what the students are working through. For Carol, this meant continually reflecting on her students’ comments and questions and finding ways to regularly provide resources and support, including considering what the technology might afford the work her students were doing. In this case, they used new digital technologies in their critical literacy work as a way to make visible to others demonstrations of possibilities for acting on social issues such as fairness and how to disrupt imposed power and control.

Societal norms or assumptions about children and their roles are deeply embedded, such as children are supposed to listen and follow the ideas of the adults. The students in Carol’s class were able to disrupt such societal practices, proving that they, too, can contribute to decisions in their school lives. This was due in great part to the fact that she framed her teaching practice from a critical literacy perspective. In the end, when reflecting on the work done by her students, Carol surmised that the work that went into creating the podcasts and engaging in the social action work far surpassed the school and district mandates and standards.

Janks and Vasquez (2011) remind us that today “books can be downloaded, music and images can be re-mixed and immediately retrieved using quick response codes” and that “Web 2.0 has given young people a global audience for anything they choose to upload” (p. 1). New digital technologies have created a space in which, from a critical literacy perspective, we can produce and reproduce identities and enter global online communities. Janks and Vasquez note that regardless of the format used or the issues explored, the project should always be the same, that underlying all critical literacy work should be an understanding of the relationship among texts, meaning making, and power to undertake transformative social action that leads to the achievement of more equitable social practices.

We invite you to consider what the demonstration of possibility in this article might offer you as you consider ways of creating spaces for critical literacies.

Such work provides more than what a traditional curriculum offers. Carol’s students developed new ways of expressing their concerns and contributing to change. The whole class knew they wanted to change what they felt was an unfair situation. As Janks (2000) states throughout her work, teachers provide the tools for students to best present their ideas and work for the injustices they identify. It is therefore our responsibility as teachers who create such spaces to be there to support what the students are working through.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Suggested Resources

Resources for Exploring Critical Literacy


Picture Books That Help Create Spaces for Critical Literacy

We believe critical literacies ought to stem from the inquiry questions of students, but we also understand how challenging this can be. We offer the following books as a way to begin to create spaces for engaging students with critical literacies.

• Browne, A. (2001). Voices in the park. New York: DK. This book focuses on one story line as told through different characters’ perspectives. This multiple-voice book creates a space for taking up issues of positioning, identity, and power. Conversations with students can address whose perspective is dominant or marginalized in each version and the effect of such dominance or marginalization. Students can also discuss how the author offers these different perspectives through the use of language and images.

• Bunting, E. (1993). Fly away home. San Anselmo, CA: Sandpiper. This is the story of a father and son who live in an airport. Themes addressed include homelessness, economic status, power, family structures, and identity. One place to start when using this text is by asking what the title of the book means from the students’ perspectives. After reading the story, a space can be created to explore what is on the students’ minds: What surprised them? How did their original assumptions about the book shift after reading it? A discussion could then take place about different definitions for the word home and where our definitions originate.

• Choi, Y. (2001). The name jar. New York: Dell Dragonfly. This is the story of a young girl who moves to the United States from Korea and experiences teasing from the other children about her name. The potential themes to address include identity, ethnicity, culture, power, exclusion, immigration, and assimilation. Conversations can revolve around naming practices, names we respond to and like, and names we do not like to respond to that are hurtful. A discussion can take place regarding the origins of names and how names can influence what one can and cannot do and who one can and cannot be.

• Munsch, R. (1992). The paper bag princess. Toronto, ON, Canada: Annick. In this counternarrative tale, the princess chooses to wear and act in ways that her soon-to-be prince husband does not like. In short, she is not princess-like. However, she ends up rescuing the prince from the lair of the dragon that took him away. Some themes addressed in the book are identity, power, stereotypes, and gender. After reading the book, conversations can begin with a simple question, such as What do you think? or What is on your mind? Children often come to school with particular ideas and constructs for princesses. This book creates a space for students to engage in the social practices around gender issues and how gendered identities are produced, what is problematic about some of these identities, and how such identities are maintained as problematic stereotypes.

• Rosenthal, A. K. (2009). Duck! Rabbit! San Francisco: Chronicle. This picture book is a take on the age-old optical illusion. Two characters, whose conversation we read but who we do not see, engage in an exchange about what they see: Is it a duck or a rabbit? What it is really depends on the perspective you take. The book is a good one for talking about perspective and positioning and how we decide on what something is or is not.

• Watt, M. (2008). Scaredy Squirrel. Toronto, ON, Canada: Kids Can. This whimsical tale is about a squirrel who is afraid to take risks and leave the safety of the tree where he lives. It is a good text for taking up issues of perspective and where our perspectives and beliefs originate. It is also a good starting point for discussing how we might take on other perspectives or positions and the possible effects that may result.
References


