Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section
Joanne Hindley Salch and Marianne Marino, Co-Editors
Vivian Vasquez, Guest Editor

Critical Literacy: What Is It, and What Does It Look Like in Elementary Classrooms?

Negotiating Critical Literacies

by Barbara Comber, University of South Australia, Center for Studies in Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures

Barbara Comber defines critical literacy as the opportunity to use language in powerful ways to get things done in the world. She describes three fronts that teachers work from to negotiate critical literacies in their settings. Her article sets a framework for reading the remaining articles in this issue, which offer snapshots of the types of spaces that classroom teachers have created in elementary school classrooms in order to engage with critical literacies.—V. V.

Critical literacies involve people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice. This sounds grand, but often—perhaps usually—critical literacies are negotiated in the more mundane and ordinary aspects of daily life. Critical literacies include an ongoing analysis of textual practices: How do particular texts work? What effects do they have on the reader? Who has produced the text, under what circumstances, and for which readers? What's missing from this account? How could it be told differently? Critical literacy means practicing the use of language

in powerful ways to get things done in the world. Questions such as these can be important catalysts in the process.

In elementary classrooms, teachers work on at least three fronts: they work with children's existing abilities for critical analysis; they examine examples of writing, drawing, cartoon, film, etc. that take a critical stance; and they offer children new discursive resources. In other words they make available repertoires of language practices that the children do not already have.

Identifying and Engaging Children's Analytical Abilities

Children begin school with ideas about what's fair and what's not, gleaned from five years of experience with family and community life. They also come to school with rich repertoires of narrative resources from popular culture, sports, and so on—stories that deal with who/what's powerful, who/what's cool, who the good/bad guys are. In other words, they've already had many opportunities for examining real and imaginary worlds in terms of how relations of power work. Their early play with peers and siblings, as well as solitary role-plays, demonstrates what young children make of status, authority, force, and power. Such performances, as they rehearse parts of scripts and take on the roles of popular characters, indicate that children have an ear for powerful language use (Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 2000). Many children, in fact, have already learned a great deal from television and videotexts, and there is rich material there that teachers can exploit (Kavanagh, 1997). For instance, children can re-enact favorite commercials and analyze how they work. They can design new com-

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How do you know what is being advertised? How do you know whom the products are for? What do the advertisers want you to think about the products? Which words and pictures tell you that? How?

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mercials for other products or rewrite existing commercials in ways that they think are more honest, effective, dramatic, or humorous.

Children are accustomed to thinking analytically about power and pleasure and listening to and producing powerful texts. The task for teachers is to help children to develop a meta-awareness and a meta-language for what they already know how to do and to assist them in applying these resources to the texts and situations of school life. The varying practices that different children bring with them can become part of a collective capacity to solve problems and approach possibilities.

Examining Critical Texts

The everyday worlds of community, media, and literature contain many texts that take a critical stance that young children can appreciate: from the picture books of writers like Anthony Browne, to explicitly counter-sexist fairy tales and counter-racist new histories, to television spoofs and cartoons. Reading contrasting versions of a story or a historical situation, especially where at least one text takes a critical angle, can help children to understand that texts are never neutral: they are constructed by particular people with particular goals and motivations.

Being critical doesn't mean that there's no fun or that children need be relentlessly negative or bleak. Many critical texts use humor to make their case. There are local cultural practices such as Speakers' Corners, talk-back radio, popular music, and so on where children can see critical discussions of ideas and events and notice how people use words to make meaning. Such texts can become the objects of study in classrooms, and children can experiment with these genres in their own writing.

Helping children acquire, practice, and invent critical literacies means that teachers must make the time for children to take analytical stances; to research how things are, how they got to be that way, and how they might be changed; and to produce texts that represent the under- and mis-represented.

Teachers can develop a library of critical texts. As a secondary English teacher I used to collect cartoons from newspapers, irreverent postcards, and other materials to examine with students. In discussing what made these funny, young people frequently demonstrated a sophisticated analysis of the ways in which language works to "hit a target" or make an argument.

Acquiring and Using New Discursive Resources

Teachers can help children learn to think about and question texts in ways that develop their analytical capacities and critical reading practices. Educators in South Australia have found that a critical language awareness approach (Fairclough, 1989, 1992; Janks, 1993) accessible to elementary school children is an investigation of junk mail, starting with questions such as these (O'Brien, 1994):

- How do you know what is being advertised?
- How do you know whom the products are for?
- What do the advertisers want you to think about the products?
- Which words and pictures tell you that? How?
- Who produces these advertisements?

Teachers need to have a strong knowledge of language theories and textual practices in order to help children acquire new discursive resources—ways of saying, representing, reading, and writing context-specific genres that may be unfamiliar in children's everyday lives, but that do specific work in particular situations. And, when teachers' practices are designed around social justice principles, community events and situations can become the objects of study. Comber, Thomson & Wells (2001, forthcoming) have documented a project in which young children and their teachers researched and became advocates for better environmental conditions in their neighborhood. As they investigated the condition of trees in their local area, seven- and eight-year-old children learned to read maps, design surveys, and analyze the results. They sent faxes to local government authorities and designed new recreational facilities and streets. In learning about this important topic, the children began to acquire crucial textual practices for accessing information and services in the contemporary world.

Critical literacy is not a finite set of practices. Helping children acquire, practice, and invent critical literacies means that teachers must make the time for children to take analytical stances; to research how things are, how they got to be that way, and how they might be changed; and to produce texts that represent the under- and mis-represented. We have to assist young people in assembling a set of discursive tactics and strategies. They can learn these strategies from each other, from teachers, from published writers, Web designers, filmmakers, linguists, journalists, and others by focusing on the workings of language in specific situations. ▼

Critical Conversations

by Michael Muise, Indiana University, Bloomington

Friday afternoons in my classroom were always reserved for free time, when the children had the opportunity to pursue their inquiries and interests free of the scrutiny of mandated curriculum. This time of the week often resulted in many opportunities for us to explore a variety of texts, including media.

One Friday afternoon I noticed Kristen emphatically engaged in a discussion with Todd. Lingering in the backdrop of this conversation, I watched as the two hovered over a "swimsuit edition" of *Sports Illustrated.* A sports fanatic, Todd subscribes to this magazine and had brought it to read during free time.

During their conversation Kristen expressed her discomfort with the magazine. She asked Todd questions such as, "What do sexy women laying around on a beach have to do with sports?," "Where are the baseball, hockey, and football players in their swimsuits?," and "Who do you think this magazine is for?" Her questions encouraged Todd to raise similar questions for himself. Kristen argued the magazine was really targeted to a male audience and challenged Todd to think about whose interest this issue served.

> The opportunity for conversation in a critical literacy curriculum is paramount. In this instance, conversation provided these two students with the opportunity to critically examine popular texts. Furthermore, it proved to be an opportunity where they could comfortably challenge and inform one another's ideologies.

After listening to their conversation for quite some time, I asked if they might be willing to broaden this conversation to include the rest of the class. During our class meeting at the end of the day, Kristen wasted no time in sharing with the class her disapproval of Todd's *Sports Illustrated.* She challenged her classmates with questions similar to those she had posed to Todd.

One of the results of our taking up the "swimsuit" incident was a letter to the editors of *Sports Illustrated* raising the issue. Heading up the committee, Kristen and Todd spent several writing periods drafting and editing their letter to the magazine.

The opportunity for conversation in a critical literacy curriculum is paramount. In this instance, conversation provided these two students with the opportunity to critically examine popular texts. Furthermore, it proved to be an opportunity where they could comfortably challenge and inform one another's ideologies. Their letter to the editor highlights the social-action nature of this project and signifies the important role that conversation plays in a critical literacy curriculum. ▼

Re-Thinking My Classroom: A Nike Story

by David Chiola-Nakai, Corpus Christi Elementary School, Mississauga, Ontario

One of the stories I read with my class is *Hockey Fever* by R. J. Childerhose. The story is about a hockey game between a team from an urban area and one from a rural area. Part of the story focuses on the obvious difference between the two teams' uniforms: The team from the city wears matching uniforms and is outfitted from helmet to skates. The team from the rural area wears a ragtag mix of whatever equipment and uniforms they can find. This contrast led us to a discussion about classism and how people position each other in classist ways based on the clothes one wears. We talked about what clothing is considered "cool" and wondered who determines what is "cool." A conversation arose which centered on Nike clothing and how Nike clothing is "cool."

I mentioned this conversation to one of my colleagues, who proceeded to tell me about a *20/20* program she saw on television dealing with Nike's treatment of factory workers in Third World countries. I asked her if she would come into my classroom and share what she had seen with my class. She did, and soon after I began to sense my students' growing awareness of the overwhelming presence Nike has in their lives. They began to take much more notice of the plethora of Nike gear worn in the school. I could hear disbelief in their voices as they began to discuss issues of fair wages and child labor. Posters appeared on the classroom walls depicting anti-Nike sentiments. Similar to the way it has come to dominate the sports world, the Nike

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sports empire suddenly became the focus of a classroom study.

I could feel the sense of being overwhelmed by the idea of taking on such a huge conglomerate. Imagine a group of 11- to 13-year-old students taking on the giant of the sports world. But as Harste (1997) has said, history is replete with examples of "tripping the giant" (p. 2).

I found myself caught in the whirlwind of what was happening in and out of the classroom. My role in the classroom became blurred: I was both a resource and a learner. I searched the papers and magazines and provided articles and materials to students engaged in their various inquiries.

I began to see how we could use surveys and graphing, investigating maps and charts, money, letter writing, learning logs, posters, questionnaires, response logs, and presentations in our investigations. Two students designed a survey to find out the approximate number of hats, shoes, and shirts that were owned by students in our school and how many of these were Nike products. They took the information and drew graphs and reported what they had discovered. They then went on to do a presentation to our reading buddies, first-grade students that we read to once a week, about Nike's mistreatment of workers. Many students designed posters depicting anti-Nike sentiment. Two other students wrote a joint letter to Phillip Knight, C.E.O. of Nike, asking him to tell Nike's side of this story.

What began as a conversation around a story turned into a discussion around issues of power and consumerism. I started to see how the classroom could offer space for conversations using the daily texts that students meet at school. ▼

"One Tough Woman":

Strategies to Support and Sustain Critical Conversations

by Christine Leland and Jerome C. Harste, Center for Inquiry, Indianapolis

At the Center for Inquiry in Indianapolis, undergraduate interns shared critical literacy books with elementary school students. After reading *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (Lester, 1999), Mitzi Parsons, a classroom teacher, asked the students to use Lee Heffernan's Post-It Note Strategy (2000) by completing one Post-It Note for each of the following stems:

Something important I want to remember . . .

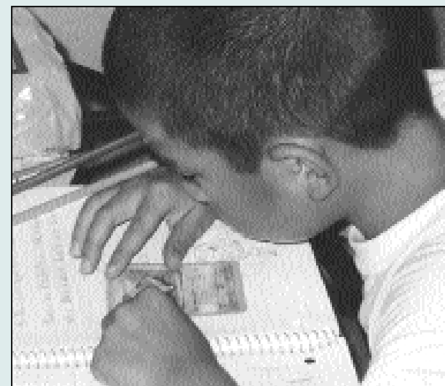
A connection I made with the book which I could write about . . .

A lasting image I will retain from reading this book . . .

The book contains many graphic and disturbing images relating to the treatment of slaves, and the students illustrated their responses with images that reflect a sense of brutality. While Maggie, a student in Mitzi's class, remembered the chains, her classmate Jessica drew the scarred back of a slave who had been whipped. Her annotation that *it made me hurt inside just to see someone's flesh torn apart* speaks to the impact of these books on the lives of the students who read them.

Mitzi also shared *Molly Bannaky* (McGill, 1999) with her students and invited them to respond through a "Sketch to Stretch" (Short, Harste, and Burke, 1995), which invites participants to "symbolize what this story means" and helps language users understand that they can create meaning in many sign systems. The process of moving to a different sign system (called *transmediation*) helps people to move beyond their original interpretation of a story and to see new possibilities for understanding and interacting with the world. On the surface, *Molly Bannaky* is the story of an indentured servant who was brought to the New World to pay off her debt through labor. After earning her freedom, she purchased a slave and then challenged the status quo by marrying him. Sketches produced by Mitzi's students show how this activity supports diversity and difference. Maggie's sketch, for example, portrays Molly as "one tough woman," and is a testament to the indomitable spirit of women and their ability to rise above all kinds of obstacles. The accompanying caption reads: *I was a maid, a criminal twice, a mother of 4, an indentured servant, a farmer, and a great housewife.*

Although they aren't the only strategies we use, both the Post-It Note Strategy and Sketch to Stretch are meant to support and sustain critical conversations about literacy in Center for Inquiry classrooms. ▼



Writing as a Tool for Change

by Lee Heffernan, Childs Elementary School, Bloomington, Indiana

I have taught writing to elementary students for 17 years. Over this time I have logged thousands of hours reading student writing that I refer to as "recycled topics." You probably know what I mean: the dog stories, the kid sister stories, and the stories about the broken arm or the slumber party. I was disappointed with my students' passive interest in writing until I became involved in a critical literacy project in which I read books that focused on "social issues" to my third graders over the course of a school year (Heffernan and Lewison, 2000). The conversations that emerged astonished me. Not only did the kids know much more than I had anticipated about current events and issues of justice, they showed a keen curiosity for topics such as racism, poverty, and consumerism.

The passionate conversations that erupted daily in Reader's Workshop made the passivity of student writing during Writer's Workshop even more disappointing. One day, as the kids sat on the rug for a writing mini-lesson, I held up a number of the books we had recently read and asked, "Why do you think these authors wrote these books?" The kids quickly responded with statements like, "Maybe he wanted us to think about how it feels to be left out" and "Maybe she wants people to change how they treat other people."

We talked about the power that writing can have. I suggested that we try our hand at writing stories that would encourage our readers to reflect on the world. I hoped to shift the emphasis of Writer's Workshop from the personal to the social.

We made a list of the different purposes and themes in the books we had shared. Next we looked through our writer's notebooks to find pieces with important themes. Kids selected pieces that they thought could be combined to make a picture book that could have social impact. After storyboarding, writing, and many revisions, the kids published original books that explored school problems.

In "A Whole New Day," Min wrote about a Vietnamese character who is teased about her facial features. In "A New Craze," John wrote about how the Pokemon card-collecting craze excluded kids who had lesser collections than others. In "Carrot Head," Janet wrote about a shy child who finds it hard to speak for herself at school. In "Soccer Surprise," Ben wrote about the daily problems with bullying and arguing that occur at recess on the soccer field.

As the kids read their books to other classes, they emphasized that their stories were important, often claiming that their stories could "change the world." This critical literacy project brought not only a new awareness of others but a feeling of community to the Writer's Workshop.

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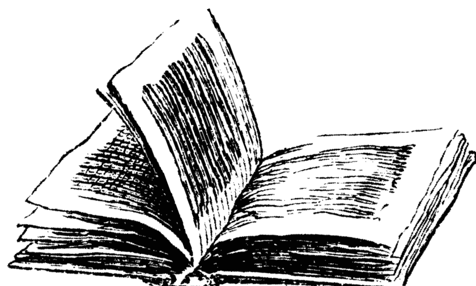
Each of the writers in this issue is at a different place in his or her conceptualization of critical literacy. Given a different time and space they could each be telling different stories, moving in different directions, working with different texts, some perhaps pushing the envelope a little further in order to practice the use of language in more powerful ways. The common denominator in each of these stories, however, is that all of the people have attempted to create spaces in their particular locations to engage in critical literacies. We hope that this issue helps you to do the same. ▼

L. TROVILLION PHOTOGRAPHY.



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Next Issue: The July issue of *School Talk* will focus on the Writer's Notebook.

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Co-Editors: Joanne Hindley Salch and Marianne Marino. NCTE Production Editor: Rona S. Smith. Designer: Pat Mayer.

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