Using the Everyday to Engage in Critical Literacy with Young Children

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It has been over 14 years since I began exploring what critical literacy could mean in different settings (Albright et. al, 1999, Vasquez, 2003b, 2001a, 2001c, 2000a, 2000b, 1994). In particular, my work has focused on young children primarily between age 3 and 8 (Vasquez, 2003a, 2003b, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2000a, 2000b). Of the work I have done, especially with pre-school aged children, a consistent question asked of me has been, ‘Do young kids really talk about social issues or equity issues?’ and ‘Why can’t we just let them be kids?’ This is often followed with ‘Preschoolers don’t really talk like that do they?’ (meaning as critical participants and analysts). My experience in working with young children has proven time and time again that children are in fact very capable and willing to participate in hard conversations that are meaningful to them and that impact their lives. Sometimes it is adults that have difficulty with this, often due to a feeling of uncertainty regarding how to talk about difficult topics or issues with children. When this happens the literacies with which they can participate in the world are ‘bound’ (Rowe, 2005) since children are only able to speak using the discourses that have been made available to them or for which they have had access. This implies that part of schooling therefore needs to be about making accessible dominant and powerful discursive practices that create spaces for young learners to participate differently in the world.

It’s a hard time to be a kid these days. Day in and day out children take in multi-modal bits of information consisting of words and images that sometimes conflict and at other times are complementary. Often this textual information works to position them in ways that offer up ideals for who they can and cannot be in the world today, who they should and should not be as well as what they should and should not do or think. Given this complex world, we cannot afford for children not to engage in some tough conversations if they are to learn to become critical analysts of the world who are able to make informed decisions as they engage with the world around them.

The opening image is a re-design of the front matter of the packaging of a snack food popular with young children created by five-year-old Emily. Specific analysis of Emily’s re-design is explored later in the paper while I show and tell some of the ways that a group of pre-school students and I used everyday public and social texts as sites for taking

Figure 1. “People like to be happy and this is happy.” Emily, 5 years old
up social issues from a critical literacy perspective. It was created during a research study I did with a group of pre-school students between ages 3–5. In this article however I focused my attention on a focal group of five children. There were two girls and three boys in the group. The pre-school was located in a highly multicultural, middle to low-income community in a suburb of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Many of the children at the school received government subsidies. Having worked as a consultant in the school I was given permission to work independently with the group of five children.

The study, which took place in the summer of 2003, and is the basis of this paper, was on analyzing everyday text as one way to make visible the power of taking up such texts as tools for understanding how language works and the importance of practicing the use of language in powerful ways to get things done in the world (Comber, 2001). The stories I recount in this paper took place within a period of two weeks, but as mentioned earlier, it was part of a larger research agenda at the school.

First I will make clear what I mean when I use the terms critical literacy and everyday texts. Following this I will walk you through some deconstructive and reconstructive work with the group of five pre-schoolers as we engaged in critical literacies. You'll hear about what Hilary Janks (2002) refers to as motivations and methods for doing this work and learn about the differences that access to critical discourses can have in various settings.

**Defining Critical Literacy**

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

(Vasquez, 2003b, Negotiating Critical Literacies, Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc.)

Comber (2001) describes critical literacies as involving people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice. She continues by saying “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? Who has produced the text, under what circumstances, and for which readers? What’s missing from this account? How could it be told differently?” (Comber, 2001, p.1)

My experience working with teachers attempting to engage in critical literacy shows me that in many cases social issues are treated as variables to be added to the existing curriculum. This rather than using these issues to build curriculum, is done often because the topics are associated with cynicism and un-pleasurable work or because these topics are relegated as part of non-formal schooling, thereby positioning this critical work outside of school discursive practices. However, critical literacy does not necessarily involve taking a negative stance rather it includes looking at an issue or topic in different ways, analyzing it and hopefully being able to suggest possibilities for change or improvement.

It involves beginning from the notion that texts are never neutral and that they are written from particular perspectives, stances, or vantage points and that these carry with them particular ideologies. As such, texts work to position readers in particular ways. At the same time however, we as readers, take in texts from particular perspectives, stances, and vantage points, and as Hilary Janks and Roz Ivanic (1992) suggest, children need to understand that they can contribute either to reproducing or reshaping existing asymmetrical social relations where there are top dogs and underdogs.

Often issues of social justice and equity seem to be looked upon as heavy-handed issues.

The discussions I have had with my students and the children who have participated in my research, the actions we took, and the work we accomplished, although often serious, were very pleasurable. We enjoyed our work because the topics that we dealt with were socially significant to us.

**Everyday Texts: What Are They?**

When I use the term everyday texts I am referring to texts that are spoken or written as part of everyday life. These texts can be so common that we do not carefully take notice of them. As a result we can be less aware of the kinds of messages about our world which they convey. Since these texts are not natural representations of the world they can be interrogated, deconstructed, and analyzed to uncover different views of the world they could represent. In doing so we are able to make visible the lifestyles and social identities that are constructed through what is presented and how it is presented creating space for the redesign of such texts.

**A Look at Early Critical Literacy Practices Using Snack Packages from Popular Foods for Children**

Unpacking Fruity Peel-Outs

The work described in this section of the article deals with the deconstruction and re-design of a Fruity Peel-Outs box. Fruity Peel-Outs are candy fruit snacks for children. Sheets of sweet, sticky, pliable candy come rolled up in individual packages ready for children's consumption. On the first day of the study one of the focal preschoolers happened to bring a box of these candies to school.

The Fruity Peel-Outs box brought immediate interest to others in the group as they began calling out things they noticed on it. Capitalizing on this interest and re-
calling the work done by Comber and Simpson (1995) on analyzing cereal boxes I asked them to pass the box around and had each child name one thing on it that they noticed. While they did this I kept a list of all the items they mentioned. Andrei started, “I spy with my little eye Mickey Mouse!” Rola followed, “I spy with my little eye some fruit!” They continued in this fashion integrating one of their favorite games, ‘I Spy’ into the textual analysis I was attempting. For me this was a reminder of possibilities for the ongoing creation of curricular spaces for critical literacy as we moved back and forth between my capitalizing on their interests in the popular snack, and their capitalizing on the activity I had initiated by integrating, into the naming activity, the game ‘I Spy’.

What is difficult in creating these curricular spaces is resisting over-schooling the children’s topics and co-opting their interests thereby diminishing their pleasure with it. These spaces therefore need to be negotiated carefully with attention paid to the interests of the children.

We continued our activity by talking about what kind of work each piece of information could accomplish and discussing who might want that information and why. Part of what I talked about with the children was the ways in which word and images work together and apart to produce differential effects for the reader. Emily noted, “I want the information about peeling the Mickey Mouse shape.” She continued by saying she liked the Peel-Outs better than other snacks because of the Mickey Mouse shapes in the fruity candy. Miguel suggested that his father would want the fruit because “that’s yucky good for you.” Apparently his father only lets him eat ‘good’ snacks. Once we had established that various texts and images are desirable to different groups of people and for different reasons, we continued by talking about how, in particular, the words and images work. We began to unpack the linguistic features on the box analyzing the effects, on the reader, of the words, pictures and symbols. I did this with them as one way to begin identifying the cultural values being promoted and presented, for whom and in what ways. For instance in a society that is bombarded with informational text on the nutritional values of food it is no wonder that Miguel is drawn to the ‘health aspect’ of the Peel-Outs.

To do this work I discussed with them what they thought were good ideas and bad ideas for texts and images to be included on the box if they were to be re-designed. Following were some of their responses.

Andrei
Andrei thought it would be a good idea to include images of fruit and kids to show that the fruits are good for the kids. He thought it was a bad idea to have anything having to do with dirt or garbage because that isn’t good for kids (See Figure 2).

Geoffrey
Geoffrey also thought it would be a good idea to include fruit. He likes the Peel-Outs and said his mom would buy them if they were good for him, “and if there’s fruit in them she’ll buy them.” He thought it would be a bad idea to have a person’s name like “Geoffrey” because then “other kids who aren’t Geoffrey won’t think they should buy it” (See Figure 3).
Emily
Emily drew her family to represent something good that would make them buy the Peel-Outs. She said "people like to be happy and this is happy" (See Figure 1). Note that Emily puts on offer a lifestyle as a conceptual frame for selling fruity Peel-Outs. She referred to her design as "the same as on T.V." referring to recent ads for such companies as Target, Gap and Old Navy that portray family and peer activities and people doing enjoyable things together as a concept for selling clothing using very subtle branding of these products. So clearly, different communicative processes are thrown in the mix.

Miguel
Miguel drew a picture of bees to represent a bad idea stating, "If you are allergic then aha – you'll be scared to death to buy this" (See Figure 4). He also puts on offer a particular lifestyle that promotes well-being and safety.

Hilary Janks (1993) notes, that identifying discourses, which are at work in texts, is an important part of reading critically and interrogating texts. Already, the children through their selections of good and bad ideas are making visible the discursive life styles (namely health, safety, and happiness) or ways of being that would lead someone, in particular adults in their lives to buy or not buy the Peel-Outs.

Following this we talked about how language works on consumers, such as themselves. We discussed how words, images, and symbols on the food packaging work to position the 'buyer' of the product as a believer, someone who puts faith in what the product claims to deliver. In doing so we touched on the feelings and emotions that are encouraged and promoted through combinations of words and images. We also discussed the notion of temptation and how consumers might be tempted to buy particular products or goods and the role that such elements as font style or color might play.

Having done some deconstructive work we turned our attention to re-designing and creating our own versions of the Peel-Out boxes. To do this I gave the children the option of using a black-line representing the front section of the box (See Figure 5).

The children then took their collection of good ideas and used them to re-design the Peel-Out box. Following this they considered whether words would or would not help sell the product. Emily felt that words would not be helpful if it was on the box but words would be helpful in a television commercial. Without hesitation the children stood from their chairs and began acting out their good ideas.

We talked about who would say which lines and where they would position themselves in the shot. Miguel held up a make-believe camera in what became his directorial debut. "And action..." he called out signaling for the performance to begin. With this Emily entered stage left humming all the while. "Cut...cut..." the director called out. "Just walk the dog, don't hum!" he said firmly. If you recall dogs was part of Emily's concept for the commercial. Nowhere in her drawing had she hinted at music as an integral part of her 'good idea.'
With this we talked about the use of music and what kind of music would work or not work - how loud or how soft it should be and why, along with what effect different kinds of music would have on the viewer. More and more learning was generated as we further deconstructed the Fruity Peel-Outs box looking at other areas of the curriculum and talking in the language of science or math from a critical literacy perspective.

We also went online to take a look at the website of the company that manufactures the Fruity Peel-Outs. While on the site we discovered a comments page. Deciding on whether or not to submit a comment resulted in another flurry of discussion and activity where the children debated over what to say in their comment. During this debate we talked about how the size of the comment box limits what you can say in terms of the number of words you can use as well as the communication system through which to convey your message. We talked about possible reasons for the limited space for comment and came up with a short list including “maybe the company wants to hear a little from us, but not a lot” and “maybe they don’t really want to hear from us but maybe they just think they have to say they want to know what we think.” When we didn’t hear back, after submitting our comments and suggestions, the children returned to their thoughts regarding the comment box and discussed further whether companies really do pay lip service to thoughts from consumers and talked about other possible ways that consumers could get their comments across to such companies as the manufacturer of the Fruity Peel-Outs.

So imagine the potential, the learning, and the literacies that were constructed. Certainly not the kind of literacies that stems from mandated prescriptive literacy programs. Also imagine how much more accessible a curriculum that incorporates the use of everyday text and print would be for a linguistically and culturally diverse group of learners. One of the advantages of using popular culture and everyday print is that the texts used can and should be negotiated with the children based on what is interesting and intriguing to them and using textual materials available in their lives.

**Becoming Informed by Children’s Unexpected and Problematic Performances**

Comber and Simpson (1995) note that we need to be informed by children’s unexpected responses and problematic performances to see what kinds of readers, writers, spellers, speakers, listeners, viewers, they are becoming. Often these unexpected responses come from the everyday issues they bring with them to the classroom. The problematic comes into play as we define these issues as extra-curricular, intrusive or disconnected with school literacy. So how do we capitalize on children’s unexpected and problematic performances? A place to start is by carving out spaces in the curriculum for practicing critical literacies and putting into effective use the issues that children raise and,

**using language to,**
- Question
- Interrogate
- Problematize
- De-naturalize
- Interrupt
- Disrupt

**that, which appears,**
- Normal
- Natural
- Ordinary
- Mundane
- Everyday

**as well as to,**
- Re-design
- Re-construct
- Re-imagine
- Re-think
- Re-consider

**social worlds, spaces and places.**

With the pre-school children I attempted to provide opportunities to examine the ideologies of everyday texts that they brought to the classroom from the early beginnings of schooling to provide opportunities for them to begin practicing critical literacies while also learning to negotiate meaning, participating as code breakers, text participants, text users and critical analysts of everyday, social and school texts (Luke and Freebody, 1999).

The potential of looking in new ways at the texts, which surround us and construct our worlds still remains largely untapped in early childhood classrooms (Comber and Simpson, 1995). There is much we can learn from these new textual practices. What I’ve shared with you in this paper is a snippet of possibility. There is much work to be done and lots of room for it, more than you might immediately imagine. How might you create spaces in your settings to take up critical literacies during these hard times?

**References**


