Creating a Critical Literacy Milieu in a Kindergarten Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to better understand the process of engaging in critical literacy practices with kindergarteners. The researcher spent six months in a kindergarten classroom taking extensive field notes on the ways in which the teacher and students explored issues of social justice through literacy activities. Data analysis using a critical literacy framework revealed that this kindergarten teacher did not merely incorporate critical literacy lessons into her classroom, but rather created a critical literacy milieu. This milieu helped support students to respectfully consider multiple viewpoints, to engage in thoughtful problem solving, and to openly discuss difficult issues revolving around difference.

Key words: critical literacy milieu, social justice, kindergarteners.

"I had this evil teacher in second grade who told me, 'You can't be Fern in Charlotte's Web because you are not white,' and very bluntly told me that. So I just remember struggling a lot with what my identity was and sort of finding a place where I belong. Because I distinctly remember having times I wished that I had blonde hair and blue eyes and sort of looking like the rest of my friends, at least during the earlier years in school. So I think, especially to teach in such a diverse school and especially the way that the world is today, one of the major issues that critical literacy addresses is diversity, and I really wanted to make sure that all of my kids felt validated." ~Emma

As a former first grade teacher who stumbled upon critical literacy practices only after leaving the classroom to pursue a graduate degree, I was excited to meet Emma, a kindergarten teacher of Korean American heritage, and to have the opportunity to observe her commitment to these practices in her everyday interactions with her students. While I had read the theory behind critical literacy sprinkled with some anecdotes that illustrated practices, I was interested in immersing myself in a setting that would allow me to gain a better understanding of the complex process of engaging in critical literacy practices with kindergarteners. Critical literacy requires that students read the word (decode/encode words and make meaning of those words) and read the world (decode/encode people, communities, and the visible and invisible messages embedded in texts and experiences) (Freire, 1970; Wink, 2005). Critical literacy uses literacy practices such as reading and writing as the conduit through which to examine issues of social justice such as race, class, gender, and other demographic categories. As such, critical literacy is not "a piece of knowledge" to be fed to students but is rather "a culture of thinking" that engages students in observing their world in ways that move them toward considering issues of equity and access (Hadjioannou & Fu, 2007).

In order to gain a better understanding of and contribute to the existing knowledge of critical literacy, I entered into Emma's classroom to learn how a kindergarten teacher created this culture of thinking with her five-year-old students. In my experience, there is an assumption that kindergarten students are too young to discuss the "isms" that undergird social inequities, much less to take action toward creating a more just world. I hoped that Emma could shed light on the possibilities of creating critical literacy experiences that helped children, many of whom were encountering formal literacy instruction for the first time, to understand the purposes and power of reading and writing. In addition to this overarching research question, there were several more specific issues I hoped to explore. Knowing that critical literacy practices were most effective when grounded in children's real-world encounters, I also wondered how the socio-cultural life experiences the students brought to the classroom impacted their engagement with critical literacy. Furthermore, I sought to understand how Emma's socio-cultural life experiences affected her commitment to engage her students in critical literacy practices. In other words, to what extent and in what ways did she demonstrate a critical stance?

Theoretical Framework

It is often assumed that childhood is a time of innocence where children view others as "just people" without regard for the color of their skin, their heritage language, or their socio-economic status. Teachers often seek to protect this presumed innocence by creating "safe" classroom environments that keep students from the potential harm of conversations around

tough social issues (Schmidt, Armstrong, & Everett, 2007). However, researchers illuminate a reality in which children continually name the differences they see around them and use these differences to decide whom they will befriend and whom they will avoid (e.g. Tatum, 1997; Van Ausdale, & Feagin, 2001).

As a result of this growing body of literature, there is increasing encouragement for classroom teachers to address the needs of the diverse student population through the use of challenging, engaging, culturally responsive curricula that support students in becoming critical consumers of knowledge and active participants in the democratic process (Neuman, 2006; Nieto, 1999; Shannon, 2007; Siu-Runyan, 2007; Sweeney, 1997). One way to achieve this disposition is through the use of critical literacy.

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) offer one of the most complete definitions of critical literacy as it is enacted in classroom settings. They identified four dimensions of critical literacy: "1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 382). Disrupting the commonplace requires students to question what is considered "the norm." Supporting students to explore multiple viewpoints means teaching students how to listen and consider the perspectives of all, including those who are often marginalized. Focusing on sociopolitical issues means that students have an opportunity to explore issues of power and ways in which subordinate groups do/do not have a chance to participate in social processes. Finally, critical literacy promotes action and socially just change.

Schaull (1970) asserts that

> Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 16; emphasis in original)

A critical literacy framework advocates the latter, which has important implications for how teaching and learning are envisioned and enacted in classrooms. Viewing education as "the practice of freedom" necessarily means that multiple perspectives are welcome in classroom discourse as students and teachers name, reflect, and act on oppressive social structures (Wink, 2005). The inclusion of multiple voices in the teaching and learning process is also a necessary ingredient for more democratic practices. Rogers, Mosley, and Kramer (2009) argue that in the process of disrupting and critiquing societal power relationships, critical literacy practices end up valuing "dialogue, debate and dissent" which are essential "features of a democracy." Critical literacy, therefore, becomes "the vehicle for building more democratic communities" (p. 7). These democratic communities rely on the communication and understanding of diverse experiences. As Dewey (1944) contends, "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 87).

In conceptualizing education for democratic citizenship, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identify three types of citizens: a personally responsible citizen, a participatory citizen, and a justice-

oriented citizen. Underlying each of these categories are core assumptions that guide the behavior of each type of democratic citizen. Personally responsible citizens believe that solutions to social problems lie in each individual citizen; they "must have good character" and "must be honest, responsible, and law abiding members of the community." Participatory citizens believe that the improvement of society lies in citizens who "actively participate within established systems and community structures" (p. 240). Finally, justice-oriented citizens believe that social problems can be solved only through a critique of structures that lead to societal change; they believe that "citizens must question, debate, and change" (p. 240). While all types of citizens have the potential to contribute positively to a democratic society, critical literacy works specifically to support the development of justice-oriented citizens who are more apt to promote social change in ways that honor equity and access for all.

In its mission to develop justice-oriented citizens, democratic approaches to education rely on problem-posing methods. Freire (1970) first introduced the idea of problem-posing education, describing it as a process in which "people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p. 64; emphasis in original). Problem posing emphasizes an educational process where value is placed on the problems students pose related to their own life experiences (Kincheloe, 2001; Quintero, 2004).

In addition to connections to democratic practices, a critical literacy framework also draws on a complex theory of literacy that goes beyond the more traditional focus on discrete skills necessary for decoding and encoding the written word. Rather, critical literacy practices recognize the ways in which literacy skills are intricately tied to social identities, thereby necessitating the concept of multiple *literacies.* These literacies are socially situated, ideological, and connected to power in society (Morrell, 2008; Rogers, Mosley, Kramer, & the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group, 2009). Furthermore, literacy development means very little if it is not grounded in purpose, namely understanding literacy as a tool for social change (Freire, 1970).

Children's learning is mediated through the use of speech. Gee (1999) differentiates between "language in use or stretches of language (like conversations or stories)," or what he calls discourse with a little "d" and Discourse with a big "D," which "involves acting-interacting-thinking-valuing-talking-(sometimes writing-reading) in the 'appropriate way' and with the 'appropriate' props at the 'appropriate' times and in the 'appropriate' places" (p. 26). He describes Discourse as a tool kit, in which resides all of the information needed to "be" a particular identity. For example, a traditional teacher's Discourse includes information about vocabulary specific to schools (e.g. Individualized Education Program, assemblies, child study, specialized terms), about ways of interacting with students (hierarchical relationships where teachers maintain the power), about ways of interacting with families (hierarchical relationships where teachers tell parents what is expected of them), and about expectations for success (helping children gain knowledge). Discourses can often overlap, so a critical literacy educator's Discourse may contain some of the same vocabulary and expectations as the traditional teacher Discourse, but might have a different definition for what it means to help children gain knowledge and of what might be considered knowledge. Similarly, the critical literacy educator's Discourse might contain different ways of interacting with students and families that are not

hierarchical in nature. Discourses are also embedded within other Discourses, so the critical educator and traditional teacher Discourses may be part of a larger discourse called *education*.

The concept of Discourse is very useful when looking at young children engaged in critical literacy practices. Critical literacy will encourage the students to examine their Discourse of diversity and social justice. How do they talk about and act around difference? How might they define themselves according to their unique racial, ethnic, language, class, gender, and other demographic attributes? How might they define others? The identities formed within particular Discourses also include "positions of power one can exercise, as well as the power that is exercised on a person" (Vasquez, 2000, p. 5). Examining the Discourse around critical literacy practices can therefore reveal children's understanding of power within identity and ways in which they might envision a sharing of power that is more socially just. Through this exploration of Discourse, one can uncover the relationships between language and social practices and how those relationships help shape identities and understandings of others in the world. Specifically, discourse analysis provides "the critique of the hegemonic discourses and genres that effect inequalities, injustices, and oppression in contemporary society" (Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 291).

Examining discourse can also reveal ways in which power might be negotiated among children and teachers. Orellana (1994) analyzed the oral discourse of students and their teacher as they engaged in class meetings. These meetings involved two different response patterns: 1) a positioning of oneself as either for or against ideas discussed, and 2) a lack of argument as new ideas (usually helpful suggestions or comments) were introduced to the group. Even though the teachers' goal was for the students to recognize the voice they do have through the use of class meetings, Orellana found that the students often used "this power only to divide themselves among themselves, rather than to forge a collaborative re-vision of the world" (p. 11).

Understanding multiple literacies, their connections to students' identities, and the ways in which these literacies are valued or de-valued through discursive practices has important implications for scaffolding students' literacy development. A critical literacy framework is grounded in this complex conception of literacy development as it seeks to explore issues of power through text with the ultimate goal of re-visioning the world in more equitable and just ways.

Research Context

I arrived at Briarwood Elementary[1], located in the suburbs of a major metropolitan city on the east coast, by 8:00 AM. Nestled among single-family homes and townhouses, the school draws students from lower- to middle-income families, many of them dual-income. Some students live in multi-family residences due to the high cost of real estate in the area and a currently declining economy. Children, bundled up to stay warm on the chilly winter day, were already arriving at the two-story brick building; some walked from home with siblings or parents, some arrived by car, and some excitedly hopped off of the school bus. The children, Kindergarten through sixth-grade students, represented a variety of cultural backgrounds (34% Latin@, 30% European American, 14% African American, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American, 9% unspecified). This diversity, however, was not reflected in the staff waiting to greet the children; they were predominantly white.

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[1] All names used are pseudonyms.

Even though it was January, it was my first day as a member of Emma's Kindergarten class, and I had butterflies in my stomach. Having been an educator for 15 years (eight in first and second grade settings), I was comfortable communicating with children, but there is always that moment before meeting students when you wonder what they will say, what you will say, and how it will look to begin building a relationship with them. The students were not scheduled to begin their day until 8:30 AM, so after reporting to the office to sign in and receive my visitor pass, I made my way down the Kindergarten hall to Emma's classroom, where she was busily getting supplies together for the day. Emma welcomed me and went over the instructional plan for the morning. We decided that she would introduce me first thing during the morning meeting. Until then, I sat back to take in my surroundings as the students began to trickle into the classroom.

Emma designed her classroom for and with her students. A large open gathering space on the floor faced a rocking chair and white board easel, a corner filled with writing supplies and student mailboxes, a large comfortable white leather chair filled with fuchsia and blue pillows surrounded by shelves and baskets of books, a row of five computers, student cubbies and coat racks, a large rectangular table next to a shelf overflowing with art supplies, numerous pocket-charts filled with letter and picture cards, a small square table set up as a listening center with a tape recorder, multiple headsets and basket packed with books and tapes, and a corner with a bathroom, sink, counter space and storage cabinets. A chalkboard spanned the wall between the gathering space and the student mailboxes; however, it was used more as a magnetic board than for writing on with chalk. It contained magnetic cards labeled and illustrated with the various morning activities (free choice, meeting, DEAR [Drop Everything And Read], reading workshop, writing workshop, story, learning stations, special, lunch) that could be rearranged to show the schedule each day. It also contained picture cards and magnetic letters that students could manipulate and charts of student names written in alphabetical order.

The wall above the writing supplies featured a list of learning station behaviors expected by all students, written by the students themselves. Bulletin boards throughout the room displayed student artwork and text written either by Emma or by the children through interactive writing. A wall exhibiting the students' birthdays and a closet highlighted the "Student of the Week," with pictures that the featured student brought from home. Because the room was used by another teacher and her students (the "blue class") in the afternoons, many displays were color-coded to distinguish the work produced by Emma's students (the "red class") and the blue class. In the center of the room sat five round tables with four to five chairs around each one, where the children sat to complete various reading and writing activities. These tables also doubled as "centers" during learning station time. Each table had a basket of shared supplies (pencils, crayons, glue, and scissors) and a basket of books in the center, while each chair was draped in a hand-sewn chair pocket labeled with the students' names containing individual supplies, including poetry folders and reading bags filled with books. The chair pockets were reversible; when the blue class came to the classroom after lunch, they would flip the chair pockets over to reveal their own reading supplies. The print-rich environment was inviting without being overpowering, and the students had the knowledge and freedom to navigate all areas of the classroom.

Once all of the students arrived, unpacked their belongings, and had an opportunity to engage in free choice activities such as puzzles and drawing, we gathered in a circle on the floor for the

morning meeting. I scanned the circle at the 21 faces staring back at me. They were a diverse group of students who each brought five to six years of rich, unique experiences to the classroom community. About half of the students came from homes where Spanish was spoken; in many cases Spanish was the dominant language, but there were a few children who were raised as simultaneous bilinguals, learning Spanish and English since birth (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004). It was common for the students to be absent for extended periods of time as they visited family in other parts of the world. In fact, Fatima was not there that first day, as she was in Guatemala visiting her grandmother and other extended family. Adriana would later head to Argentina for an extended trip to see her grandparents.

According to Emma, these departures were an accepted and valued part of the culture of Briarwood. This perspective was evident to me as I saw Emma and her students enthusiastically welcome children back into the community and inquire about their experiences while abroad. I also witnessed students using Spanish to communicate with each other, particularly during learning stations. Carlos and Manuel often reprimanded their peers, namely Fatima and Maria, for using Spanish in Emma's classroom, stating that Spanish was only to be used in their afternoon Spanish immersion program; however, I never heard Emma disrupt the use of Spanish. Five of the students—Manuel, Crystal, Maria, Gisella, and Guillermo—were pulled out of the classroom once or twice a week for additional assistance from the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher.

Most of the cultural diversity in Emma's classroom stemmed from the various countries from which her Spanish speaking students hailed. There was only one African American student, Sierra. Emma told me that this was the first year since she had been at Briarwood that she did not have a larger percentage of African American students. Furthermore, this number was not reflective of the overall population of African American students at Briarwood (14%).

In addition to racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity, the students were diverse in their life experiences and academic knowledge. Many of the students were already reading at this point in the kindergarten year. Sierra, Claire, and Carlos were reading simple texts while James was already reading at a second grade level. In contrast some students, such as Manuel, Maria, and Tiffany, were working on the concept of a word versus a letter and matching sounds to letters. Two of the students, Tiffany and Gisella, received additional support from the speech and language specialist. There were students who lived with large extended families and some whose families were spread out not only across the United States, but across the world. Many students could be considered world travelers while others traveled only within the metropolitan area.

Before she began the morning meeting, Emma introduced me to the students. She explained that I was a friend of hers who was also a teacher. She went on to share that I would be working with them in their classroom for the rest of the school year. A chorus of, "Good morning, Mrs. Stribling!" nearly knocked me down with its volume and enthusiasm. The children appeared to have no qualms about accepting me into their community. In fact, they were quite used to adults moving in and out of their classroom as Emma made use of many different parent volunteers and instructional staff throughout the year. Over the next six months, I developed a relationship with the class as a whole and with specific individual students; they viewed me as another teacher whom they turned to when they needed assistance. As I developed these relationships and

observed the students' learning, I began to understand what exactly happened when Emma used critical literacy practices with this diverse, vibrant, and knowledgeable group of kindergarteners.

Method

I had the privilege of spending two and a half hours a day, two days a week, from January to June in Emma's classroom, taking extensive field notes to document the ways in which she and her students explored issues of social justice through literacy activities. The class read texts and engaged in discussions that inquired into skin color, gender, segregation, homelessness, and related sources of injustice. For example, the issue of skin color emerged in January as the students learned about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and prepared for the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Emma was thoughtful about how to frame students' understanding of Dr. King so that he was not just a person with a long list of facts attached to him that students needed to memorize to fulfill a state standard of learning. She wanted to place him and his work in a larger context so that students would better understand the importance of Dr. King's work and the timeline of events related to racial equality/inequality in U.S. history leading up to the historic 2009 presidential inauguration.

Emma began with books and discussions on slavery; she discussed the concepts of "ownership" and "freedom" with the children while reading *Follow the Drinking Gourd* by Jeanette Winter. She shared books about the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln, discussing how the abolition of slavery did not result in equal rights for everyone, but rather led to a segregated society. She further explored the concept of segregation through Dr. Seuss's *The Sneetches* and Jacqueline Woodson's *The Other Side*. At this point Emma introduced Dr. King and his dream of equality and peace.

During the four or five weeks in which the students were engaged with these issues and texts, they became fascinated with comparing their own skin color with their peers. Emma decided to return to *The Colors of Us* by Lillian Katz, a class favorite introduced at the beginning of the year. Emma wanted to capitalize on the students' interest in skin color and further explore their unique identities, so she decided to engage the class in their own "Colors of Us" project. Emma approached her students with the idea to paint their own portraits, as Lena does in the story. The students mixed paints to match their skin color and painted a template of their head and shoulders. Emma purposefully gathered all of the students around one table and, one at a time, the entire class watched as each student identified the colors they thought should be mixed in order to create their own skin tone. In this way, all students were engaged in exploring multiple skin tones, not just their own. The process elicited rich conversation about the misconceptions of labeling someone "black" or "white"; in fact, they concluded, they were all shades of brown.

Once the portraits were complete, the class brainstormed unique characteristics about each classmate and engaged in and shared individual writing that was later displayed with the portraits in the school hallway. They referred to the story, *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman, as a model for understanding one's unique characteristics beyond the obvious markers that are visible to everyone. Emma chose a student or two each day about whom the rest of the class would write. At the beginning of Writing Workshop, students would brainstorm characteristics about that person such as, "He tells funny jokes," or "She likes painting art." Once everyone had an

opportunity to offer input, the chosen student would decide which statement she/he wanted the class to write. At this point, Emma "shared the pen" with the children as they figured out how to document the sentence using their knowledge of sight words and letter/sound correspondence.

In addition to the sentence written by the class, Emma worked one-on-one with each student to help her/him construct an additional sentence about herself/himself. The completed portraits and descriptions were then hung in the hallway in order to share "The Colors of Rm. 129" with the rest of the school community (see Figures 1-4). As this example illustrates, texts and discussions generated further literacy activities and action plans. In addition to field notes that captured these activities and plans, students and teachers were interviewed at the start and at the end of the project, and class discussions focused on social justice issues were audio-recorded.

My interest in exploring the interactions and development within Emma's classroom required a case study research design (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Stake, 2000; Wolcott, 1994; Yin, 1994). According to Yin (2003), "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). I envisioned that engagement with critical literacy practices (the contemporary phenomenon) would look unique in Emma's classroom with her practices being inextricably linked to her context. Therefore, the best way to describe the process as it unfolded was through a case study design. This study represents a portion of a larger dissertation that employed a multiple case-study design and examined critical literacy practices in a second-grade classroom as well. Results from the second grade data and across the two contexts are reported in other manuscripts (Stribling, 2009; Stribling & DeMulder, 2014).

While Yin (2003) defines case study design in terms of the process, Merriam (1988), in her earlier writings, focuses more on the end product of the design stating, "A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 21). In later writings, Merriam (1998) expands further on the "case" aspect of case study, describing "the case as a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 27). Her rule of thumb for deciding whether case study design is a good fit for a given research project requires asking whether or not there are a finite number of people who could be observed and/or interviewed in a finite amount of time in order to gather information about a given phenomenon, thus creating "boundaries" for the case. This project fits this criterion; I was interested in looking at a unique classroom with a finite number of students and teachers as they engaged in critical literacy practices over the course of a specific time period. Furthermore, this study was *particularistic* (focused on a specific phenomenon, critical literacy), *descriptive* (full of "thick" description), and *heuristic* (written in a way that illuminates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon), all critical features of case study design (Merriam, 1998).

One of the criticisms of case study design is the tendency for researchers to merely describe the phenomenon without grounding the research in theory. Sometimes this approach is useful, particularly for new areas of research that have not been extensively explored. A sufficient research base exists that supports the underlying theoretical basis for critical literacy, so my hope was to engage in what Merriam (1998) calls an *interpretive case study* where descriptive data "are used to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical

assumptions held prior to the data gathering" (p. 38). I did not only want to describe what I saw happening in this classroom, but I planned to analyze, interpret, and theorize about the process of engaging young children in critical literacy practices.

Data Sources and Analysis

Audio-recorded interviews and class discussions were transcribed and were, in conjunction with the researcher's field notes, coded for emerging themes. A critical literacy framework was used for initial coding; critical literacy framework analysis uncovered the extent to which the curriculum encouraged students to engage in the four dimensions of critical literacy: "1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice" (Lewison, Flint, &Van Sluys, 2002, p. 382) and how this engagement progressed through the dimensions over time. The dimensions acted as the "etic" (outsider) categories imposed on the data in order to determine how the classroom under study fit within existing critical literacy theory, and within those etic categories I engaged in another layer of coding to uncover the "emic" (insider) categories that emerged from the participants themselves (Maxwell, 2005). This additional coding fell under a grounded theory approach, providing the opportunity to dig deeper into the data in order to begin generating theory that was grounded in the observed classroom experiences.

Three levels of coding—open, axial, and selective—revealed themes that both complemented and deepened my understanding of the critical literacy framework. The initial open-coding consisted of reading my field notes and coding for emic categories. Through this process I uncovered 29 emic codes; many of these were connected in some way to the four dimensions, but I felt that it was important to tease them out so as not to miss anything that the data might suggest. During the axial-coding process I double-checked that the data within each code made sense as a group, checked for significant overlap in codes, and sorted the individual codes collapsing them from 33 discreet ideas (29 emic codes plus the four codes from the critical literacy framework analysis) to six big themes: critical literacy dimensions, teacher personal experiences, classroom experiences which included community and curriculum, social experiences beyond the classroom, student engagement with literacy, and challenges. I then moved on to selective-coding where I read the data from the interviews and transcriptions to see how these fit or did not fit into the codes I developed from the field notes; in all cases these additional data only added more depth to the field notes and did not generate any new codes. The findings discussed in this paper focus on the "classroom experiences" theme, particularly on the community that was fostered within the critical literacy milieu.

Findings

When reading through the Kindergarten data, I was struck by the ways in which Emma did more than just implement critical literacy *practices* in her kindergarten classroom; rather, she created an *atmosphere* that was grounded in critique, reflection, and a quest for more equitable relationships and interactions. Although there were examples of this atmosphere from the start, I first coded it when reflecting on the Colors of Us Project on February 25:

> I'm really impressed that Emma has given the power to the student to decide which idea is written about him/her. Who wants to be known as a shy person anyway? There is something powerful here regarding voice, choice, power, etc. Critical literacy is, at the core, about issues of power—I don't think I've used this word (lens) to examine what I have seen in the classrooms. If I think back, though, there are many instances of Emma sharing power (not getting recess, problem solving, etc.). I'm starting to think of critical literacy as an "aura" rather than as "practices." It's not just the lessons, discussions, activities, etc. that make it critical literacy—instead, it's the <u>atmosphere</u>—students being heard, respected, valued, empowered . . . . a critical literacy atmosphere versus critical literacy practices [In other words, a *disposition* that then guides classroom *practices*]. Finally—I want to mention the discussion Emma introduced to refocus the students. She uses this language <u>a lot</u>, but this is the first time I really noted it: "I need you to . . . .", "Thumbs up if you think you can do that", "I think you can." This relates back to this idea of an "atmosphere." (I might need to brainstorm a better word . . . .)

Even in my reflection I recognized that using terms such as "atmosphere" or "environment" seemed to fall short; they just did not adequately capture the sense of shared community and respect that was created through critique and reflection. Therefore, I chose to name this phenomenon a *critical literacy milieu*, "milieu" referring more to the social or cultural nature of the surroundings, the intangible aspects of the environment that are so vital to the discourse of that environment.

Within this milieu, Emma and her students used the four dimensions of critical literacy— disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on the sociopolitical, and taking action—in their daily community building interactions. These dimensions were not used merely as intellectual exercises, but rather were deeply imbedded in their "ways of being" in community with one another. Emma's critical stance established the milieu by modeling respect for differences, thoughtful problem solving, and effective engagement with difficult issues.

Taking a Critical Stance

Emma's commitment to creating this milieu could be connected to a critical stance that has been developing in her since she was a young child herself. In my initial interview with Emma, she talked about being only one of two Asian children in her first grade class. She "distinctly remember[ed] never having read or seen a book that had a character that look[ed] like [her] until [she] was in fourth grade [when she] read *In the Year of the Boar & Jackie Robinson*." As quoted in the opening of this article, Emma went on to talk about how her second grade teacher would not allow her to play the part of Fern in the class production because of her skin color and to articulate her commitment to making sure her students felt comfortable and validated in their own skin. Reflecting on her own personal experiences allowed Emma to connect with her students' potential feelings and pushed her to find ways to honor their diverse identities and experiences.

There were also some references Emma made to particular students that illustrated her commitment to taking a critical stance. During the interview, she referenced the discussion the

class had that day about the book, *Amazing Grace.* She had wanted to talk to the children about her own race and her personal connections to the story, but had run out of time because of all the questions the students were asking. She indicated that, in the past, students had assumed that she was white. This limiting binary measure of black or white did not consider the colors of many other people in the world. Emma said, "I don't know where the kids who are from Hispanic families, where they feel they fall in that."

Additionally, after reading *Blue and Gray* to the class, Emma mentioned her concern with how Sierra, the only African American student in the class, might be feeling about the discussions on slavery and race and was considering pulling her aside to ask. Emma was really struggling with this dilemma because she had never been in a situation before of having only one African American student in her class. She did not want Sierra to feel isolated, but she also did not want her to feel singled out. Emma took these tensions and thoughtfully decided to respond through the Colors of Us Project. Creating an opportunity for students to engage in a hands-on exploration of skin color ended up being an effective way to take these tensions of black/white, inclusion/exclusion and critically explore them with the children. The students then became an integral part of an inquiry project about skin color; they had an opportunity to challenge the notions of "black" and "white" and generate new knowledge about identity, taking on their own critical stance.

Respectful Problem Solving

Within this critical literacy milieu, Emma modeled respect, problem solving skills, and effective ways to talk about difficult issues. She took seriously the questions and the concerns that the children raised and encouraged their voices to be heard within the classroom. One powerful example occurred in early February as the class was gathered on the carpet for reading workshop:

> **Feb. 2:** [The] other class comes in to get coats so they can go outside. Students announce that they don't ever get to go outside. Emma—"Don't you go out with Sra. Martinez? Children—"No." "Not that much." Emma tells them that she will look into this—the teachers will talk and work out a better plan for their recess time outside. Example of students attempting to take action? Of course, Emma played a huge part in this—she took their concerns seriously. She did not dismiss them or tell them they do go outside ("lying") or tell them that this was not something they were supposed to be talking about at the moment. She took them seriously and offered to assist with solving this problem. She does not pull her "power" to silence them. Sharing power . . . .

Emma treated the children with respect, acknowledging the power they have in their classroom to voice their concerns, particularly regarding issues of fairness and equity. Not having ample recess time was clearly troubling the students and Emma took the time to stop the reading lesson and engage in discussion about this issue. She valued their viewpoints as students experiencing this injustice and modeled one way to take action; she helped bring their perspectives to the attention of their afternoon teacher in order to make a change.

Unfortunately, recess continued to be a disconcerting issue for the children. Toward the end of March I noticed a note that Carlos had written to Emma saying, "We don't go outside because there is no time to go outside." When I asked Emma about it, she indicated that the recess issue came up again that morning, and she had asked Carlos to write her a note so she would remember to talk to Sra. Martinez again. Although it was disturbing that the students were still not getting outside to play, it was impressive to see how Emma did not let the issue drop. She was determined to continue the negotiations with Sra. Martinez, which was a powerful sign of respect for the children and their concerns. It also sent the message that taking action to make change is a process; it is sometimes necessary to be respectfully persistent in making multiple viewpoints heard and valued. Emma modeled what it looked like to collaborate with her students as justice-oriented citizens (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

There were many other examples of Emma taking time out of "planned" instruction to address issues that arose in the classroom. She used these opportunities to not only model effective problem solving but to ensure that all of the students were comfortable with class decisions and felt heard in the problem solving process. For example, Matthew was clearly upset when the class was planning their version of the folktale, *The Mitten,* and voted to make the main character in the story a girl. Here is what unfolded:

> **Jan. 9:** The boys—particularly Matthew—were not happy with this outcome. Instead of dismissing their unhappiness ("we voted, get over it" type of thing), Emma engaged the whole class in processing their thinking around this outcome. She asked if it was okay for a boy to vote for a girl character. Adriana said yes, and added that you can also be a girl and vote for a boy character. Matthew was still upset—he declared, "I don't like girl characters." Emma started naming books the class had read and loved that had girl characters. Some of the students joined in the naming and agreed that they loved these characters. Emma then checked in with Matthew to see how he felt—"Can you be okay with the class' decision?" He said, "Sure," but rather reluctantly. It was clear at this point that he was still upset about having a girl in the story. It was impressive to watch how Emma reacted to all of this—she took the time to have the conversations—voting, checking-in, offering possibilities, "can you be okay with that?" etc. In fact, as she sent the class to their seats to work on their drawing/writing books, she asked Matthew to stay and chat with her further. She is not content with leaving issues unresolved. . . . When the students returned to the carpet after writing workshop, Emma and Matthew reported back to the class about how they (he) resolved the issue he was having with "The Mitten" character being a girl. Emma asked Matthew if he wanted to share with everyone what they had talked about—he said he preferred that Emma share. She proceeded to explain to the class that she and Matthew had talked about his concern, and he thought that the other versions of the Mitten they had read already had girl characters—therefore, the class choosing a girl was not fair. Emma pulled out the books and explained that Nikki was actually a boy, so Matthew decided that the vote was indeed fair, and he was now okay with the decision. . . . I am struck by Emma's perseverance and dedication to making sure the students are heard. She models the process of working through and resolving issues.

Throughout this entire process, Emma exhibited patience and genuine interest in Matthew's perspective as they worked through the issue together. This whole exchange took only a few minutes out of the day, but it was critical to creating a milieu in the classroom where sociopolitical issues such as gender were openly addressed and where different perspectives were valued and considered in the quest for fair decision making.

Difficult Conversations

Emma did not shy away from difficult issues that emerged in the classroom, but rather faced them head on sending the message to students that their classroom was a safe place to explore all issues and perspectives. During the Colors of Us Project, the children were brainstorming characteristics that described their classmate, Crystal, who struggled with appropriate behavior, often resorting to cruel comments in order to manipulate other students and usually at the center of friendship disputes. In fact, in my initial interview with Crystal, she indicated that she liked "being mean" to and "screaming at" other girls in the class. I wasn't sure that I had heard her correctly, so I probed further. She proceeded to repeat the fact that she liked "to be mean" two more times. So, when it was time for the class to write about Crystal, one of the girls who had a lot of conflict with her said, "She's mean."

Emma seemed to take all of this contention in stride. She did not immediately silence the girl who made the comment or tell her it wasn't "nice" to say such things. Instead, Emma commented on how this remark did not accurately described Crystal. Although Crystal sometimes had arguments with classmates, Emma pointed out that, "Crystal is really working on how to be a good friend to others." As I reflected in my field notes,

> **Feb. 20:** I'm starting to really appreciate how important it is to <u>not</u> shut down students when they make comments about others and/or voice assumptions/stereotypes, etc. . . . If [that student] had been told that it wasn't nice to say that, then she would have said it anyway—but under the radar from now on. Being honest and putting feelings on the table is critical to examining our views and working toward peaceful coexistence.

This incident reminded me of Tatum's (1997) stance that when adults do not respond to children's questions and comments, they learn to be silent. By addressing the comment in a calm and thoughtful manner, Emma further reinforced the notion that their classroom was a safe place in which to disrupt the commonplace by exploring and challenging perspectives and labels that are often assigned to others.

Impact on Students

All of these examples primarily illustrate the steps Emma took to create a critical literacy milieu. Even more critical, however, was how the children responded to this milieu and whether or not they then enacted respect and effective problem solving in their own interactions with one another. Of course, these developing five-year olds did not exhibit respectful and effective communication and problem-solving 100% of the time. Emma patiently used contentious student interactions as learning opportunities to model the ways that participants in a critically literate culture can more effectively interact. Throughout my six months with this class, I observed and

documented many instances in which students enacted dimensions of critical literacy in their everyday interactions with one another that demonstrated a strong sense of community, mutual respect, and effective problem solving.

For example, one morning in late January, Emma was reading a big book to the class, and some of the children were "reading" the next page (from memory) before Emma even had a chance to turn the page. My field notes captured how she and the students handled this situation:

> [Emma] stopped the group and asked why it was important for them to wait and read only when the pointer was pointing to the words. I got the sense that Emma was thinking of reasons related to literacy development (we read words, match what we say with print we see, etc.); but the children's responses were focused on responsibility to the community. Matthew said something about not wanting to confuse your friends. Someone else said something about not racing to beat your friends to the end of the story. This seems to exemplify the sense of community these children feel.

Not only did the students' responses highlight their sense of community. They also indicated a level of respect for their classmates, an understanding of multiple perspectives, and the ways in which actions might impact others. This respect was illustrated in an exchange between Manuel and Teresa one February morning as the students were entering the classroom, unpacking, and getting ready for the day. I was not in the classroom yet, but Emma relayed the story to me. Manuel was walking around the classroom telling everyone that he had gone bowling the day before. When he got to Teresa, she was busy working on a picture at her table. She immediately put her pencil down and gave Manuel her undivided attention. She further engaged him in his story by saying, "Awesome! Tell me more. Did you knock down all the pins? That's called a strike." Teresa exhibited the behavior that Emma often displayed with the students; she showed genuine interest in Manuel's story and exhibited respect by stopping what she was doing in order to listen to him.

Students also engaged in problem solving efforts on their own. During morning meeting on May 6, Crystal was arguing with a classmate sitting next to her in the circle. This classmate accused Crystal of being mean and rolling her eyes. Crystal proceeded to yell back at her, denying the charges and blaming her for being the mean one. At this point, Matthew calmly interjected with an idea for how to solve the problem: "How 'bout you guys split apart? How 'bout that?"

Creating a critical literacy milieu was an important aspect of Emma's approach to teaching and learning in her kindergarten classroom. Some might argue that this "milieu" is nothing more than a classroom community that most teachers foster whether or not they embrace critical literacy practices. However, Emma did not dictate "proper behavior" through her authority as "the teacher," which can often be the approach taken when building a "classroom community." Instead, Emma treated her students with respect and valued them as equal partners in the classroom. Having the opportunity to use their voices, engage in thoughtful problem solving, and take part in discussions around difficult issues helped immerse these students in critical literacy in their everyday interactions, preparing them to tackle larger social issues down the road.

Discussion

The insights gained from this kindergarten classroom are important when considering the purpose of education and the goals of literacy development. If teachers hope to support students to become critically literate, justice-oriented citizens of a diverse democratic society, they need to know more about what this type of education could look like and how the process of engaging in critical literacy activities might impact the development of students and teachers. As Tatum (2007) states:

> [children] need to be in schools that are intentional about helping them understand social justice issues like prejudice, discrimination, and racism, empowering them to think critically about the stereotypes to which they are exposed in the culture. Such tools will be needed to help them acquire the social skills necessary to function effectively in a diverse world. (p. 20)

Although some might argue that kindergarteners are too young to engage in this work, Emma and her students offer a powerful example of why they should. For many of her students, kindergarten was the first time they found themselves in a formal learning environment with other children, all of whom brought diverse life experiences, values, assumptions, and expectations of others. Rather than dictate appropriate behavior by wielding power over them, Emma created space for her students to be active members of their democratic learning community. She modeled ways of being critically literate by imbedding the four dimensions of critical literacy—considering multiple viewpoints, disrupting the commonplace, focusing on the sociopolitical, and taking action—within her daily interactions with the children.

Emma modeled what it meant to consider the perspectives of others when she actively listened to the students' concerns about their lack of recess time, spent time to understand Matthew's concern regarding the female character selection, and created a safe space to talk about Crystal's behavior and its impact on others. She disrupted the commonplace when she challenged students to move beyond "labels" during the Colors of Us project. She focused on the sociopolitical when she embraced a debate about equity in male and female characterization. And she took action when she repeatedly brought her students' concerns to the attention of their afternoon teacher. All of these experiences were grounded in the classroom lives of the students. Emma not only used critical literacy practices to enhance her curriculum, she also created a milieu in which students' perspectives and thoughts were valued and placed at the center of instruction. Critical literacy, therefore, became a way of being for these students as they continually questioned power structures, challenged dominant discourses, and engaged in critical questioning with their peers and with their teacher.

In order to create this milieu in her kindergarten classroom, Emma herself had to take a critical stance. It was clear she had a keen sense of the importance of identity development as well as a passionate commitment to meaningful literacy development that honored literacy as a social practice and as a tool for social change. Emma created a space that respected students' ideas, concerns, and struggles and that modeled ways to engage in difficult conversations; her classroom represented a truly democratic community. I contend that this critical stance forms the foundation of a critical literacy milieu. In order to create this milieu, it is not enough to just tap into this stance in order to plan an elaborate unit around a social justice issue; teachers must *live*

a critical stance in their everyday interactions with their students. Creating a milieu as Emma did fosters critical literacy as a *way of being* that strengthens community and provides the foundation for meaningful literacy experiences.

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