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Critical Literacy in Early Childhood: Multilingual Books Linking Language, Culture, and Power

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Early Childhood Teacher Education is about young children's learning, young children's learning to learn, and the social and cultural contexts where this learning takes place. It is also about the people and the human aspects that support this learning. And, finally, it is about an assessment system that documents the complicated process in such a way that data can be analyzed across settings so that we professionals may continually learn. Critical literacy supports the learning about and documentation of the people, the cultural contexts, and the children's worlds. Here, in the United States, certainly in California, politics, policy, and economics make it the worst of times for programs serving children and families. However, it is always the best of times for those of us who work with young children and have the joy of seeing a child stand for the first time, share a dripping popsicle, and just laugh out loud at the bird in the window. For the professionals committed to providing the best possible educational situations for children and families we are in the midst of policy and practice every day; we are affected by both, and we affect both.

I have been working with young children and families, in preschools and in grades K-3, with bilingual family literacy projects, and now with early childhood student teachers (serving children from Birth to age 8 and their families) at the university level. After years of learning from children and families, and years of study about the various theoretical and intellectual models that involve learning and teaching, I find that critical

theory, critical literacy, and other post modern frameworks with a dedication to acknowledging children's (and all learners') strengths as well as needs, are the most positive and supportive ways to support early care and education for the children, their families, and their teachers and future teachers. As New Zealand early childhood teacher educator said (2010), "A curriculum is about the way we view the child." In addition, I am convinced that finding an assessment strategy that brings in families' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, et. al. 2007) in to the context of the learning communities in which we work is crucial.

New Zealand researchers define learning dispositions as "...complex units of educational input, uptake and outcome" (Carr, et.al. 2009, p. 15). They say,

We are more less disposed to notice, recognize, respond to, reciprocate with, author, improvise from, and imagine alternatives to, what we already know and can do. (Carr, et. al. 2009, p. 15)

The research described here documents a combination of philosophy and assumptions about child development and learning potential of children in contexts of homes, schools, and communities and critically developed child-centered curriculum. In addition, the study documents Early Childhood Education professionals in the United States struggling to learn to implement assessments that are collaborations of teachers, families, and children.

Carr, et. al.(2009) address the importance of thinking about children's learning in all aspects of their lives:

The cultures that develop in early childhood centres and school classrooms can be described as 'dispositional milieux'; they may be overt and public, or subtle and

covert; they may support the spirit and intent of a curriculum document or they may not... We suggest that learning dispositions are features of places, in the case of early childhood centres, school classrooms and homes. These dispositional mileux are affordance networks: networks of useful resources, including people, that provide, *or appear to provide*, opportunities and constraints for the learning that the individual has in mind. (p. 8)

Participants of this study and I believe that, in a small way, we have begun to make connections with our work in teacher education to these “affordance networks” as a framework for encouraging us to see our work as teacher researchers, curriculum developers, activity facilitators, evaluators of programs, and assessors of children’s growth, development, and learning as a holistic connection that spirals and connects and reconnects in a variety of ways. The dynamic process and outcomes in our milieu teach us every day what we can improve upon, how much we all have yet to learn, and how appreciative we are of the pioneering work of our New Zealand colleagues.

The Research Framework and Methodology

I work with groups of student teachers in urban and rural schools. We support students’ multiple languages and recognize ways that multiple knowledge sources, identities, and language forms can contribute to the formation of new relationships and meanings. The theoretical and philosophical frameworks of all participants in the study point to the holistic weaving of context, culture, affect and cognition, and the necessity for learners of all ages to be the masters of their own learning journeys.

Our work uses critical literacy, based on critical theory, as a framework. In critical theory the underlying elements are participation by all, respect for multiple

sources of knowledge, and the responsibility for transformative action (Freire, 1997; Freire & Macedo, 1985; Kincheloe, 2007). I have found by working with teacher education students, children, and community participants that this framework, that qualitative research methods provide a mechanism for addressing complex, critical issues, in an honest and collaborative way. Using qualitative methods to support the use of critical theory in an organized, purposeful and recursive way structures research so that the theory keeps at the forefront the underlying question of research “What is really going on here?” for the community participants—children and their families, and for us as qualitative researchers.

We define critical literacy as a **process of constructing and critically using language (oral and written) as a means of expression, interpretation and/or transformation of our lives and the lives of those around us.** Critical literacy as a teaching method is a way to facilitate student choice and generative work that is integrally related to students’ lives (Freire, 1985.) In addition it creates a meaningful point of departure for all aspects of learning for participants. Furthermore, writing activities that include personally meaningful contexts have been documented to support success (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1987; Greene, 1995). Critical literacy then becomes a mechanism to document these meaningful links.

Our work uses critical literacy as a framework for integrated curriculum that includes all the traditional content areas of study, the arts, and new forms of cross-disciplinary ways of knowing. The pedagogical methodology informed by critical theory, is often called problem-posing and is the framework for our use of critical literacy. This leads students of any age, experience or ability level to base new learning on personal

experience in a way that encourages critical reflection and demands active participation. This method has not been widely used with younger learners, but lends itself well to integrated literacy development and curriculum activities. I find that by using Problem-posing with the adults in my early childhood teacher education classes, the university students are equipped to create and implement problem-posing integrated experiences for young learners in their student teaching classrooms. The combination of story, literature, and critical theory allows participants to use autobiography as a way to move beyond a neutral conception of culture (Willis, 1995). This self-reflection is also as explained in auto ethnography as an attempt to explain self to other and an explanation of how one is “othered.”

Analysis and interpretation of this three-year study pointed to patterns, themes, and issues through observation logs, teacher journals, student work, and evaluation of learning activities to keep the intent of the research in sight. Thus, as this research and the resulting implications revolved around participatory, learner-driven curriculum for both adult early childhood student teachers and the children they work with, we have taken advice from Pinar (2004) as we think about the presentation of the findings. Pinar (2004) advises:

The complicated conversation that is the curriculum requires interdisciplinary intellectuality, erudition, and self-reflexivity. This is not a recipe for high test scores, but a common faith in the possibility of self-realization and democratization, twin projects of social subjective reconstruction. (p. 8)

Problem-Posing and Curriculum

Teaching with critical literacy using problem-posing, student-made multilingual

books, children's literature, and opportunities for home language use in literacy activities nourishes an integrated curriculum that supports children's meaningful learning. A problem-posing curriculum emphasizing family and cultural story, encourages collaboration and enhances multidirectional participatory learning. In other words, in this context, not only is learning transmitted from the materials and the teacher to students, but teachers learn from students, and students from each other. We must "search for intelligence where one has previously seen only deficiency" (Kincheloe, 2000, p. 81).

In our university program, early childhood teacher education students during their senior year, take concurrent classes studying curriculum, theory and methods for multilingual learners, and assessment while working in the field with learners birth through age 8. The university students participate in problem-posing activities (using a structure of Listening, Dialogue, and Action) framed by critical theory and critical literacy as they address the content learning in the concurrent classes. Then as they progress through their studies, they develop understandings and practice to design problem-posing activities for the children they work with in their field experiences of student teaching.

For example, in the undergraduate early childhood curriculum class, after a review of and discussion about critical theory and critical literacy, the Listening aspect of the class, for example, began with a mini-lecture reviewing curriculum theory and reiterating the connections of this work to Early Childhood Foundational theories and models. Then, the early childhood university students were asked to journal about their personal research framework for early childhood education. Then the instructor gave a short presentation regarding curriculum standards stressing that some curriculum

standards are result of work by early childhood professional organizations and other standards that are developed by state and federal groups and mandated for various age groups and grade levels.

Next, during the Dialogue activity, the university students were asked to discuss with a partner the connections they see between professional curriculum standards and their own views of curriculum (research frame). Then for the Action activity, students went to websites of professional organizations and government Departments of Education to view a variety of examples of standards and guidelines for curriculum development. After this activity, another Dialogue activity followed and students were asked to discuss what ways their research frames influence their choices for the professional organizations' website guidelines. For Action homework, the university students were asked to write a detailed narrative describing the context of the program they were student teaching in, including information about the community of the families, the philosophy of the program, the environment of the classroom, and details about a few of the children's strengths and needs.

The following class, the narrative descriptions were shared and discussed because the students (30 total) were involved in six different early childhood sites. Then bringing the university class back to critical literacy and "funds of knowledge" (Moll, et. al, 2005), the instructor read *The Colors of Home* by Mary Hoffman to the class. In this storybook a child has just joined an early childhood class from his family's direct experience and escape from a war-torn country.

In the Dialogue following the story, the university students were asked to discuss the story in terms of critical literacy. (ie, How was the child using critical literacy through

his story and his art? How did the teacher support him? How did the interpreter support him? How did he support his mother and how did she support him?) Then for the Action in class, the university students were asked to journal about the story in terms of 1) their research framework and 2) the professional standards they'd looked at. Then for Action Homework, to give students more data for considering their own literacy histories and the integrated nature of learning, they are asked to:

- Write a brief (a start) personal literacy history...one page. What are your memories of literacy experience in your life before age 8 or so? Give as many specific details as possible: What happened? What did you do? Who else was involved what do you remember about that person or persons? What were the details of context?

An example shows the complexities of early literacy by the university students that provided rich data for the next class period's discussion:

...I do not recall my mother or father ever reading, since my mother dislikes reading and my father was too busy working. Though, I do remember my family was full of stories. We would all gather around and listen to each other tell myths, scary stories, stories of their own lives and history. I remember sitting around the adults and listen to them, mesmerized by what they were telling. Even though my parents did not read to me, I had wonderful teachers that did. Mrs. Ryan was my first grade teacher and I loved how she read to us, with so much enthusiasm, she made the stories come to life. That is when I first started to care for books and I loved it when my classroom went to the library. From the library, I always got books that seemed interesting and at home since my parents did not

read to me, I ended up “reading” them to my stuffed animals. I may have just looked at the images and figured out a story from there so that I can “read” it to my stuffed animals.

The following class, after a short video stream of an interview with Sandra Cisneros in which she discusses her revelation that her own history, language, and set of cultural experiences in Chicago had been left out of her educational experiences, and thus became the basis of her writing for *The House on Mango Street*, for the Dialogue, students were asked to discuss what they chose to share of your memories with a partner.

Planning Problem-posing Curriculum for Children

As mentioned, while the teacher education students are using problem-posing to study curriculum theory, issues of language acquisition and methods for teaching multilingual learners, they are also planning problem-posing lessons for the children they are working with. James, Jenks, and Proust (1998) challenge teachers and researchers to pay attention to children’s experiences and to what situations might mean for children, not for the purposes of evaluating them in accordance with adult goals, but for the ways they inform us about how our practices contribute to children’s unequal status. These authors also criticize the emphasis that current models of education put on reading and interrogating childhood as a text. They call for inquiries that combine a focus on critically examining childhood with attention to children’s lived experiences.

We have found an extraordinary creative tool for including the experiences of children’s lives in the curriculum in Ada & Campoy’s (2004) *Authors in the Classroom: A Transformative Education Process*. The text is based on the ideals of Transformative Education for all ages of learners from a variety of backgrounds. *Authors in the*

Classroom explores the power of writing as a teacher and how the act of writing can transform the way students and families relate to the teacher, learning, and many times discover of their own voices for learning and transformative action. The university students use the models in this text as guides to create their own books to use with children and families. Inevitably, these books generate other collaboratively created (with individual children, small groups of children, and whole class groups of learners) books as a part of the curriculum that they plan and implement with children.

An example of problem-posing with the teacher education students preparing to design and implement the multilingual book-making shows briefly the process:

Listening/Dialogue: Discussion Wheel and Experiences with People

1. What were your relationships like as a young person with people of different cultures?
2. What was helpful to you in forming relationships across racial lines?
3. Ada and Campoy say, “The more comfortable we are about our roots, the more at ease we are with ourselves and the better equipped we are to unlearn prejudice and address the biases around us.” Do you agree or disagree with this idea? Why?
4. Think of a person or an experience that helped you discover that you have the ability to influence your own life in positive and creative ways.

Action:

- Using the suggestions of Ada and Campoy (2004) read *My Name is Maria Isabel* (p. 102) and then write personal responses to reflective questions of the Descriptive Phase, the Personal interpretive Phase, and the Critic/Multicultural/Anti-bias Phase.

Action Homework:

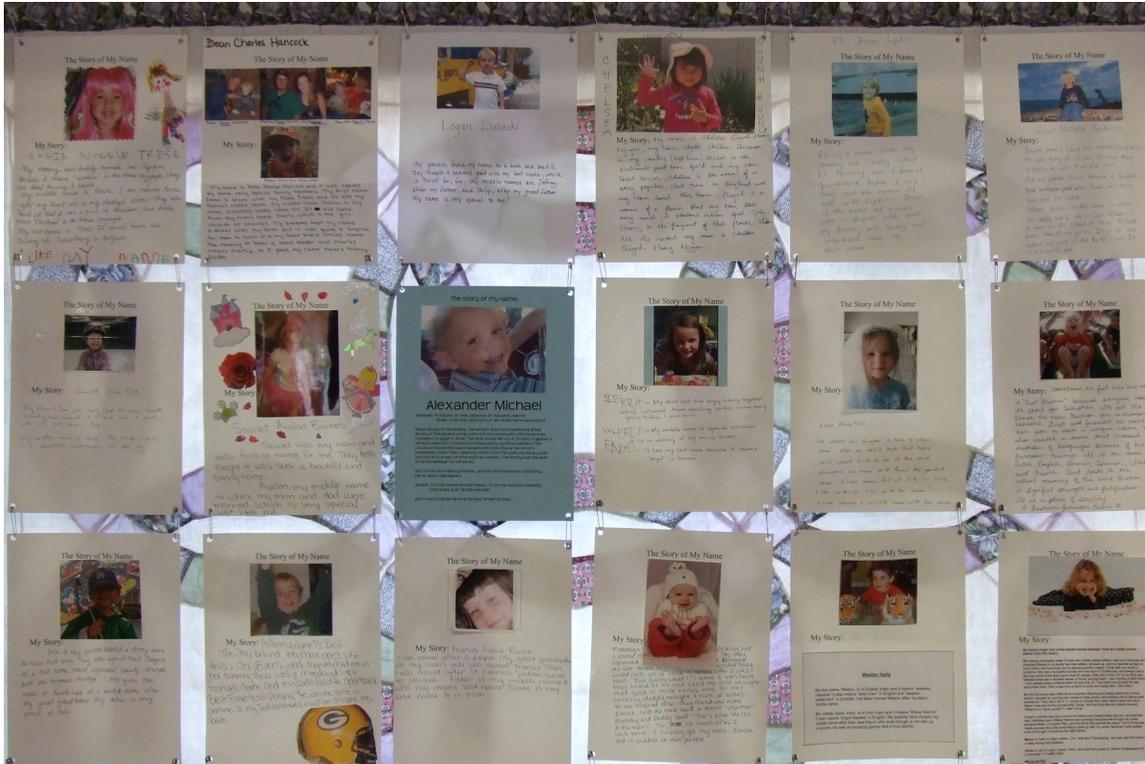
- Using the guidelines from *Creating the Teacher's Book: The Story of My Name* (Ada and Campoy, 2004, pp. 100-111) create a book and then share with children. Report what happened and then discuss your plans for using this model.

One of the university students took this exercise in curriculum development into a semester long project in the toddler class she was working in. She reported to the class by first reiterating the principles explained by Ada and Campoy (2004).

THE STORY OF MY NAME

- Names are a significant cultural element.
- Whether one has a unique name or a name that is shared with others, there is a story to be told about the experience of bearing one's name.
- When we invite a person to share the story of his or her name, we are acknowledging our commonality—we all have names, we all have life stories—as well as showing our willingness to learn more about that person's uniqueness and personal history. (Ada & Campoy, 2004)

A visual showing the "Name Quilt" she put together with the collaboration of the toddlers and their parents illustrates the enthusiasm for the project.



Another university student used suggestions from the Ada & Campoy (2004) text and reported on her work.

Self Affirmation Project (Unit 1) "Yo Soy"

This is a project that my Spanish language students loved because most children love to share their uniqueness and show their identity outside school such as their family, sports, friends, hobbies and culture. "The purpose of this process is to develop the ability to recognize the uniqueness of self and others, as well as the richness that comes from diversity." (Ada, Campoy, 2004) In the "Yo Soy" project I applied developmentally appropriate teaching. I made the content more challenging to the students who are advanced in Spanish and made it more comprehensible for those that have little Spanish knowledge. Also, since preschoolers do not write or read at this age other than writing and reading their

own name, I used many visuals, verbal use, and let them draw instead of writing. I started the project by introducing two new vocabulary words which were “yo” and “soy”, “yo” meaning “I” and “soy” meaning “am.” Whenever I said “yo” I pointed at myself and for “soy” I made a circle around my self with my hands and my answer by showing an image while I said what I am. For example, if I said I am a mother, I showed an image of a mother with a child while I said “mama”. Cummins (2008) teaches that there are many clues to meaning in face-to-face conversation including eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, and intonation. So we don't need to know as much of the language to understand the meaning or make ourselves understood.

Therefore, I used the scaffolding method of instruction. The following week I asked them what “yo soy” meant and they remembered. Then I took out my “I Am” book that I made for unit 1 and read it to my students in Spanish and they understood what I was reading because I used pictures and pointed to things I was saying. After I read my book my students were delighted to have learned more about me and wanted to make one of their own to show me too. I took out paper and crayons so that they can draw themselves. Some drew themselves as what they look like, some as a character they like on television, others as a student or what ever role they take in life. When they finished their drawings, they came to me and told me what to write what they said on their paper using the “yo soy...” sentence. For our next class we had circle time and this is where the students got to show their drawing and told us what they are in Spanish using the “yo so..” sentence. With this my students were learning through repetition by hearing yo

soy over and over again through their classmates. When they were finished presenting their self drawings, the children learned more from each other with the yo soy book. I extended the project by introducing “tu eres” personalizing it by adding the student's name and adding “es” (Anna es..). Therefore, I went around the circle and pointed to a student and the class would say what that student is depending on their hair color. My students already knew the concept of rubia, peliroja, and castaña so it was not difficult to do. As a class the students said “Anna es castaña” and so on with the rest of the students that I pointed to. We continued to practice this sentence with other themes such as gender, and personalities, ethnic background etc. By the end of the Yo Soy project, children learned self affirmation, learned about their classmates family, culture, personality, sports, ethnic background and creativeness such as saying they were “yo soy superman”. My students were also able to identify themselves in Spanish using a full sentence and learned their meaning by learning more Spanish vocabulary (language structure and use).

Finally, an example that shows a university student who is working as an early childhood teacher, moving from narrative study to action (in the sense of transformative action of critical pedagogy) as a result of curriculum development, critical literacy, and collaborative book-making follows.

Among other activities, I conducted a parent workshop (within my regular class routine in the classroom with children) to introduce an activity making it clear that Early Literacy was an important part in

children's education and that together we can help children obtain language and an early enjoyment of literacy. The purpose for this activity is to have parents and children begin an Early Literacy Interaction by exposing children to the joy of reading, to establish a routine, and introduce early literacy at home. A wide selection of books is placed in a basket for allowing children to have a selection of books. I started giving one book every Monday, each child has plastic zip bag and in that bag they place their book of choice and a half sheet of paper. The half sheet of paper includes 3 questions (in Spanish) that parents may use to involve children. They may ask questions of "Who was in the story? What happened in the story? What did you like about the story?" and then write down what children say. Parents or other family members can read the story several times when they are together. The parents only write what children say, and then at the end of the school year teacher/parents can see the growth of children's vocabulary and language. Well, only after 2 weeks parents asked if they could borrow books to take home and read to their children, so I developed a book borrowing system so parents could have the opportunity to check out books on a daily basis. Children enjoyed taking their books and pretending they had homework with their parents. It was a wonderful activity to do with the families.

The teacher, now a graduate and lead teacher, then wrote:

After reviewing this information it inspires me to continue with these activities, to promote early literacy not just to young children but

also develop literacy with adults. One of my goals is to continue building relationships with families and get to know them, then create programs and parent education meetings to help them meet their needs. These needs consist of getting involved in parent education, participating in job training opportunities, and enabling them with the skills necessary to read to their children and help them with homework. Also, the most important outcome is to help these individuals become well-educated consumers, active citizens, informed voters, and take an active role in their child's education.

In order to stress the importance of focus in the curriculum development and assessment as they both relate to our program's commitment to support young English Language Learners, I include an example of an activity that can be adapted to many of our lessons.

Listening:

- Write a brief account of children using their home language (other than English) in school. What do they say? When do they use their home language? What supports their doing this (the adults, the children, the materials, the personality of the child?)

Dialogue:

- Discuss

Action:

- Is this critical literacy? In what ways? Does this relate to your research frameworks? How?

While university students are beginning their study of curriculum development, methods with multilingual learners, and working in their student teaching placements, they also are taking a concurrent class with the curriculum class. This class is an assessment class with a complex focus. The textbook for the assessment class is Carr, Margaret (2001) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories*. New York: SAGE and the professors and students relied heavily on the New Zealand Ministry of Education website about early childhood assessment.

<http://www.educate.ece.govt.nz/learning/curriculumAndLearning/Assessmentforlearning/KeiTuaotePae/Book17.aspx>

An example of the university class structure to support students' understanding and use of the information was:

Action:

- Carr "learning dispositions" Jigsaw activity
- Using Daniel's learning story as a guide (from the above website), look at your own journal notes about children you are working with and make a learning story about literacy learning on the chart paper and share.
- Write about an "assessment question" you have about a process, a child or group of children, or some other assessment issue in your work.

Dialogue:

- Discuss above

Action:

- Review Ch. 6 in Carr, and then write individually about how you will use assessment such as Learning Stories with this experience you just worked on.

Listening:

- Read handout further explaining Learning Stories

Action:

- Looking at your own plans, what new learning, creativity, excitement, constructed knowledge will children potentially experience? Write about this (to turn in). In other words, your cooperating teachers have led children through lots of conceptual development and learning to date, your work should not repeat that learning but build upon it...
- Choose a Learning Story handout as a model and write a Learning Story about a child doing her/his “work”....

A Learning Story

I was reading a book to a boy in Ms. P’s class. He was so interested in the book since it was about sharks and most boys like books with animals in it. Every time I read a book, I always start with the cover, reading the title and the authors name as well as asking what we see on the cover. The book we were reading is called Megadolones (Megalodon) which is an extinct shark that lived millions of years ago. After reading the title, the boy said “Mega que?” meaning Mega what? He had never heard that name before. We repeated the name together, to make the pronunciation clear. I started reading the facts such as Megalodones meaning big tooth or mega teeth. “Wow! Tienes los dientes muy grandes!” said the boy. Yes!, I said. “Que tan grande son los tuyos?” “Estan chiquitos.” answered the boy. There was a picture of a megalodon's mouth, showing all

of its teeth. The boy was fascinated and right away he started to count them. When he was done, I asked him to count his as much as he could. We went on to the sharks diet and so on.

When the reading was over, the boy had knowledge about one new animal that he was very interested on as well as comparing and contrasting it to himself and to other animals. He learned that there is more than one type of shark and that the Megadolon looked more like the Great White Shark but bigger and with bigger teeth. The boy was also practicing counting by counting the shark's teeth and then his own. He did well with interacting with me and the story, an asking questions. I let him know that it is great to have questions or comments about the book while we are reading.

Next we can summarize what we learned from the book, talk about what we liked and disliked about the book and ask more questions if necessary. A math activity would be great. Counting other animals teeth and comparing it to the Megadolon. With a chart, knowing which animal has the fewest or the most teeth and which ones have the same amount of teeth. What type of food are certain teeth good for etc.

Conclusion

My research (Quintero, 2009, 2004, 2002) documents that with the help of the children, families, and community members, learners of all ages can reflect upon issues and concepts in a profound way. The poet, Anzaldúa speaks of surviving in borderlands...of being a crossroad. I believe that the current world, in which borders are in a state of flux with tenuous peace and where governments come and go, families and schools become the crossroads. The voices of teachers, of students, of families and

friends in our communities around the world can be voices of possibility if only we can listen and learn from each other.

To survive the Borderlands

you must live sin fronteras

be a crossroads. (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 195)

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