From Apprehension to Critical Literacy

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a pragmatic approach to introducing critical literacy to a group of in-service teachers. It begins with "stirring up" the in-service teachers' existing beliefs about literacy education. Then it shows how to prepare them to understand and implement critical literacy in their classrooms. In the end, one of the in-service teachers' critical literacy projects is discussed in detail. The project documents the in-service teacher's struggle with as well as change in attitude toward critical literacy as she explored the meaning and potentiality of literacy education with her student.

RESUME: Cet article présente une façon pragmatique d'introduire le point de vue critique sur l'alphabétisation à un groupe d'enseignants en activité. On commence par bouleverser les idées préconçues sur la pédagogie de l'alphabétisation. Ensuite, on montre la manière de préparer les enseignants afin qu'ils comprennent et mettent en œuvre cette critique sur l'alphabétisation dans leurs classes. Enfin, on discute en détails d'un des projets d'enseignants en activité sur la critique de l'alphabétisation; des documents du projet pour lesquels l'enseignante se démène, aussi bien que du changement de son attitude envers la critique sur l'alphabétisation puisqu'elle aura analysé auparavant le sens et les possibilités offertes par cette pédagogie pour la développer avec son élève.

Introduction

When hiring, corporations usually prefer candidates who have had experience in the positions they search to fill. It is true that experience is helpful, yet it can be sometimes obstructive. We rely on our past experience to solve problems of similar nature. Our experience, however, does not help much if the problems are of a new kind and never encountered before. If we insist on doing what we used to do, chances are

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that it will not work. Therefore, we have to treat what we know very carefully. Harste (2008a) warns us that if we are absolutely certain we are right, we will feel justified in everything we do. Then this sense of certitude can become an act of terrorism. We may, for example, mandate a particular reading program or assessment for everyone. Instead of relying on our past experience and believing that it is always right, we need to assume, Harste suggests, that at least one tenet in our existing theory is wrong. "Knowing one tenet is wrong and not being sure of which tenet it is allows us to learn" (Harste, 2008a, p. 35).

Harste's proposition about learning is in line with the concept of praxis: action and reflection inform each other (Carspecken, 1999; Freire, 1984). They are actually a dialectic, a back-and-forth interactive process. On the one hand, we need to act cautiously to test our knowledge. On the other hand, we have to reflect constantly on what we know and assume that it is lacking in something. Yet we are often inclined to act on impulse, assuming what we know is right. This is, I believe, the challenge every educator has to tackle. In fact, it was what I had to deal with in the summer 2009 when a group of in-service teachers took two literacy courses from me. One of the differences between in-service teachers and pre-service teachers is that the former have teaching experience. As discussed above, experience helps in some respect, yet it sometimes becomes a roadblock to learning, especially when it is held on to firmly. To introduce this group of in-service teachers to critical literacy, I had to problematize or "disrupt the commonplace" (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 382) they took for granted due to their past practice/teaching experience. Their sense of certitude had to be stirred up and changed to that of uncertainty before a new pedagogy of literacy was considered. In this paper, I will report on how I introduced the in-service teachers to critical literacy which, in turn, was implemented in their teaching. First of all, the definition of critical literacy, or the critical literacy I advocate, is reviewed. This is followed by an account of the courses I taught where critical literacy was brought in. Then the theoretical frameworks appropriated to help the in-service teachers understand and implement critical literacy are discussed. In the end, an in-service teacher's critical literacy project is presented and analyzed.

Critical Literacy

Research and scholarship in the vein of critical literacy/pedagogy can hardly escape the influence of Paulo Freire, whose best known work is

Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1984). For Freire, there is an invisible solidarity between humans and their world: we are not only "in" the world but also "with" the world (Freire, 1972, p. 51). Unlike animals which adapt merely to the world, human beings, Freire argues, have a guiding hand in the historical evolution of the world. He insists that human beings must be seen "as beings in the process of becoming – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality [or world]" (Freire, 1984, pp. 56-57). Freire further argues that the pursuit of full humanity has to be carried out collectively through critical dialogue. Hence, dialogue lies in the very heart of his critical pedagogy. It is the key to liberation of the oppressed. The educator is the students' partner as they engage in critical thinking and a quest for mutual humanization.

Building on Freire's work, critical literacists such as Colin Lankshear and Peter McLaren (1993) have appropriated the postmodern critique and claimed that literacy is not only social and ideological, but also plural and political. Similarly, Henry Giroux (1993) argues that literacy is critical, political, ethical, and emancipatory. Literacy is critical in that it problematizes the structure of representation; political for the world we "read" is entangled in relations of power; ethical in that the way we interpret the world depends, for instance, on "circumstances of class, gender, race, and politics" (p. 368); and emancipatory for literacy should be "a language in which meaning becomes multiaccentual and dispersed, and resists permanent closure" (p. 369). From this critical slant, literacy educators no longer limit themselves to the teaching of traditional literacy skills such as reading and writing. Literacy education is broadened to include a critical examination of issues in the social and cultural dimensions.

Stirring Up

There is a saying in Chinese: "it is easier to move a mountain than to change a person." It emphasizes (maybe in an exaggerating way) the difficulty of being open to new ideas. This was characteristic of what happened in the summer 2009 when I worked with a group of in-service teachers at a Midwestern university in the United States. They were unfamiliar with and skeptical about critical literacy I intended to teach. The summer courses I taught were intensive – they were a squeezed version of the courses offered in a regular semester. This added to the difficulty of the task I tried to accomplish. Another challenge I had to deal with was that the in-service teachers taught at different levels.

There were two elementary school teachers, three middle school teachers, and one high school teacher. All of them except one were working in an urban setting. Fortunately, they took a couple of courses from me – one in summer session one and the other in summer session two. This allowed me to integrate these two courses. It also gave me more time to expose the in-service teachers to critical literacy.

The first course was titled "Topical Workshop in Reading." It was offered in summer session one for a period of six weeks. The second course was "Practicum in Reading" offered in summer session two. The second course met every day for two weeks only. My plan was to initiate them into critical literacy in the first course and invite them to work on a critical literacy project with their students in the second course. Before that summer, the in-service teachers had taken other reading courses and assumed that my courses were simply a continuation of what they had before. They thought that my courses would offer them a group workshop study of special reading topics. They expected to learn more about how to remediate instruction after diagnosing reading difficulties, compile clinical records, and create reports for parents and schools. I was surprised that they had never been exposed to critical literacy. And they did not even appear to care about it. Yet why should they or we care? Well, previously we have learned from critical literacists that literacy is not neutral and is often used to advantage one group at the cost of another. If this political aspect of literacy is not recognized, literacy educators are likely to *reproduce* rather than *reverse* oppression. This is especially true for white educators (five of the six in-service teachers I had were white) who are usually unaware of the systemic advantage they possess in dominant literacy and, therefore, are likely to become complicit in the perpetuation of injustice (Freitas & McAuley, 2008; Gilbert, 1995; McIntyre, 1997). I also felt that I might as well join the complicity if I knew how to help my students, though it was certainly difficult, yet kept silent (Lee, 2011). Not making any voice in opposition to the status quo is equivalent to subscribing to the systemic trend that continues to privilege the dominant against the oppressed (Wilson, 2009). My students, however, should not take all the blame for their ignorance about critical literacy as it is not uncommon among the educators I have encountered. Additionally, universities and teacher educators (including me) should assume some of the responsibility, too. For example, the course titles I taught (Topical Workshop in Reading and Practicum in Reading) seem to imply that reading subsumes all we need to be literate. This misconception is reinforced by most of the

standardized tests where reading (and sometimes writing as well) is in high relief while other types of literacy such as oral literacy (e.g., speaking and listening) and non-print literacy (e.g., drawing, dancing, singing, etc.) are relativized or completely ignored.

Theoretical Framework

To help the in-service teachers see the value and importance of critical literacy, I had to first stir up or shaken their in-grained and usually restricted view on literacy. My plan was using the first course to accomplish this objective. I appropriated Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys' (2002) four dimensions framework which includes disrupting the commonplace, considering multiple viewpoints, focusing on the socio-political, and taking action. Their framework provides a guideline whereby critical literacy practice can be carried out. In fact, it is helpful not only for examining literacy but also for questioning and reconstructing our belief system.

The first dimension of Lewison et al.'s framework, disrupting the common place, consists of problematizing all subjects of study (Shor, 1987) and including "risky texts" as a regular part of the curriculum to assure "good literature discussions" (Harste, 2008b, p. 72). To find risky or controversial texts, I selected issues in literacy education that were hotly debated. The in-service teachers were introduced to articles on whole language versus phonics (Daniels, Zemelman, & Bizar, 1999; Villaume & Brabham, 2003), English only versus bilingual education (Crawford, 1991, 1992a, 1992b; Donegan, 1996; U.S. English Foundation Research, 2007), National Reading Panel (Ehri & Stahl, 2001; Garan, 2001a, 2001b; Yatvin, 2002), and DIBELS, that is, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osbom, 2001; Dessoff, 2007; Goodman, 2006), and so forth. For each issue, I put together a set of articles that represented both sides of the debate. The articles allowed the in-service teachers to examine each issue from multiple viewpoints and to focus on the socio-political ramifications (the second and third dimension of Lewison et al.'s framework). Often they were so engaged in discussion that I had to, though reluctantly, truncate it due to time constraints. These articles helped them see what they had not seen and rethink what they had practiced in their classrooms. By the time the course was half way through, the comments I heard most often were: "I didn't know there was so much controversy involved," "I didn't think about that before," "Who is right?" "Tell me what you think," and

"I am confused." I was especially excited when they said they were confused. I did not at all hesitate to tell them that part of my job was to confuse them or, in Lewison et al.'s language, to "disrupt the commonplace" they took for granted. At the end of the course, a couple of in-service teachers expressed their disappointment with politics being involved in literacy education. Yet some of them were excited and wanted to know more. Most of them were curious about what they could do next. That is, what could they do with their students while what they were teaching was actually controversial and at debate? It was due to this curiosity that I saw its connection with the fourth dimension of Lewison et al.'s framework – taking action. This curiosity loosened the soil for critical literacy to be implemented in their teaching. The next section of this paper will detail how the second course prepared them for implementing critical literacy in their classrooms.

Implementation

From the first course, the in-service teachers began to understand that literacy is not neutral, and they felt the need to help their students examine literacy critically. Yet they still had reservations about implementing critical literacy. One common question was, "How?" It is often misunderstood among the pre-service as well as in-service teachers I have met that critical literacy is nothing but critical thinking which, in turn, is interpreted simply as a problem-solving skill. This is a reductionist view on critical literacy. Though it is true that critical thinking is important to critical literacy, the latter involves more. Practicing critical literacy is acknowledging that literacy is neither singular nor neutral. Critical literacists connect literacy learning to socio-political issues and examine them from multiple perspectives. Through a critical understanding of the issues, literacy learners are informed and empowered to take action against social injustice. As a result, to implement critical literacy, the in-service teachers needed specific, practical guidance which became the focus of the second course.

Theoretical Framework

To provide guidance, I introduced the in-service teachers to the instructional model of critical literacy developed by Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008). This instructional model is actually built on Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys' (2002) four dimensions framework of critical literacy practice discussed previously. Yet it is broader and more

detailed in how to implement a critical curriculum. It begins with the exploration of students' personal and cultural resources such as home literacies, popular culture and media, social issues, books, and so forth. The idea is to know what students *can* do and use it as a starting point. This is in direct contrast with the traditional deficit-based instruction where we identify what students *cannot* do and try to remedy it. In deficit-based instruction, students are positioned as "receivers (and victims) of knowledge, not creators" (Campano, 2008, p. 145). A curriculum that focuses on what students can do makes them feel empowered while the one that targets their weaknesses further cuts them down. Another aspect of Lewison et al.'s instructional model is to link personal and cultural resources to critical social practices. Once the students' personal knowledge, interests, or issues are identified, they should be connected to a broader social dimension. Lewison et al. (2008) argue that "in a critical curriculum we emphasize how understandings are never individual or autonomous – that they always have social, cultural, and political dimensions" (p. 19). It is also after linking the personal to the social that these authors connect their instructional model of critical literacy to the four dimensions framework Lewision et al. (2002) developed earlier (i.e., disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on the socio-political, and taking action). Specifically, after personal issues are situated in a social context, the four dimensions framework is used to investigate the issues critically. Through this investigation, it is hoped that literacy learners take a critical stance by consciously engaging, entertaining alternate ways of being, taking responsibility to inquire, and being reflexive (Lewison et al., 2008, pp. 13-19).

This time, the in-service teachers seemed receptive to Lewison et al.'s (2008) instructional model as it was expanded on the four dimensions framework they encountered in the first course. They also had the opportunity to read a few research projects grounded theoretically in the Lewison et al. model. As the second course met for only two weeks, most of the in-service teachers chose to work with the students they had for their previous research projects. This was actually a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they had students ready for their critical literacy projects. They had worked with their students for a while and had known them well. This would save them much time trying to find participants. On the other hand, doing critical literacy was something brand new for them and their students as well. It was drastically different from what they had done with their students before.

They had to be open-minded and flexible in experimenting with a new pedagogy. In what follows, I will discuss one of the critical literacy projects in detail. It was a project one of the in-service teachers, Becky implemented with her student Mark (a pseudonym). Becky's project is singled out for discussion not because it is representative in every respect of the remaining cases, yet this project shows her struggle with and change in attitude toward critical literacy, an experience not uncommon among her peers.

Becky's Critical Literacy Project

Becky taught reading and math in a middle school setting. She took my summer courses to complete a master's degree in secondary education with a minor in reading. She was a young teacher with two years of teaching experience. Mark was an 8th grader at Becky's school. She had Mark as a student during the entire 2008-2009 school year. She was able to spend one-on-one time learning more about his reading skills. Here is how Becky described Mark in her vignette:

> *Mark has strengths in using context clues to define unknown words and likes oral class activities. He understands texts better when they are read aloud to him. His weaknesses are in spelling and writing activities. He also has trouble decoding words during silent or isolated reading which hinders his understanding of a story. He often lost focus during independent reading time.*

At first, Becky seemed resistant to the concept of critical literacy and asked me frequently if she could simply continue what she had been doing with Mark, that is, teaching phonics skills to him. She maintained that she knew Mark well and understood what he needed. She suspected that critical literacy would not work for him. One day after class, she showed me what she was working on with Mark. Close to the end of our conversation, she commented, "*Mark is going to high school after the summer, but he can't even spell words correctly. I think all he needs is phonics instruction.*" Becky's doubt about critical literacy is not uncommon among classroom teachers (e.g., see Leland & Huber, 2008). This is especially true for the teachers working with young elementary school students and students whose native language is not English. However, research shows that critical literacy can be implemented with young and English-as-a-second-language learners (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Sahni, 2001; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996; Van Sluys, 2005; Vasquez, 2001; Wallace, 2001).

While I reassured Becky that her diagnosis of Mark's reading ability was insightful and could be very helpful for her work with him, I encouraged her to look at Mark's issue from the angle of critical literacy. Specifically, while helping Mark to read and write was important, it should not be the only focus. In addition, a curriculum targeting Mark's weaknesses and trying to remedy them was unlikely to be motivating and successful. It would convey the message that he was not a reader and writer. It would not empower him to engage with literacy. In fact, it is a type of deficit-based instruction that tends to victimize the learners. Instead, I told Becky to use her knowledge about Mark and to identify what he could do. The project would be very engaging if she could link what Mark was interested in and good at to a broader issue located in a socio-political context. Once Mark was motivated to explore an issue to which he could relate personally and socially, he was on the way to becoming a critical literacist. In Freire and Macedo's (1987) language, Mark would be reading the word and the world.

Becky's suspicion actually showed that she cared. She was exploring the possibilities of critical literacy and reflecting on her past belief about literacy education. Below is her reflection in response to Harste's (2008c) thought piece "Understanding Reading – Multiple Perspectives, Multiple Insights" she read for leading a discussion in the second course:

> *I had at one time thought of democracy and community very narrowly as giving students equal say in class or voting on certain things, but I am learning more about myself as I continue to reflect and grapple with this as a teacher. I am mindful that I too am ever-changing as I grow to understand democracy and community in the classroom. The best way to express my growth in this area is to quote Harste from page 103,* "Not all perspectives are equal. Some are clearly more powerful than others in that they are more robust; they explain more of what constitutes our ever-changing and more complex insights into reading. Though everyone may have a right to his or her own opinion, multiple perspectives invite people to continue to grapple with fundamental issues, thus disrupting the tendency to provide easy answers to complex problems."

Becky's reflection showed that she was contemplating both her role as a teacher and the nature of literacy education. She was thinking about how to position herself as a teacher in relation to Mark as a student in a democratic learning environment. This is about the power relations embedded in literacy learning (Lee, 2009). She was also aware of the

complex nature of literacy that should be examined from multiple perspectives (Nieto, 1999). I encouraged her to keep on reading about critical literacy and to reexamine Mark's case from a critical lens. In the end, Becky decided to work on her critical literacy project with Mark by using the instructional model of critical literacy suggested by Lewison et al. (2008). Following is an excerpt from Becky's vignette, the report she wrote for her critical literacy project.

Becky's Voice

*I began the project by explaining to Mark the purpose of our meetings. First, we would find a topic he was interested in, do a little reading or research on the topic, and then attempt to make a social, political, or cultural connection. I needed to clarify things for Mark because he believed that we would be working on his reading, spelling, and vocabulary skills. I said we would still work on those things, but there were some new things we would do also. He shared how he read and wrote daily for an hour. This was encouraging because I hoped he could continue reading through the summer. Then he added, "*My dad makes me because sometimes I don't want to do it.*" I thought to myself, "Oh, no!" Reading shouldn't be forced on him. I wanted him to choose to read. I realized this was a perfect opportunity for me to explain our critical literacy project.*

I told him this would be a kind of spontaneous conversation. We would just talk and write and read and eventually we would find something of interest to him. We discussed the purposes of a critical stance. I explained how everyone has interests, but sometimes we have strong feelings about how those things relate to us in society, politics, and cultures. I explained in simpler terms how we can choose to participate, help find solutions, and think about how we are involved directly and indirectly with the issue. I was not totally sure he understood all of this information, but I would look for opportunities to reference this again during our discussions.

We started by making a list of words that described him, the things he liked or activities he enjoyed doing. These things could be foods, sports, or hobbies. We were going to find his interests first and then read about them. He was excited about this idea until we started writing words on the list. Mark was a fairly quiet kid and I suspected that it was a struggle for him to think of lots of things. I encouraged him to find at least ten things to write and to help keep the conversation going. During this

activity, his spelling problems surfaced. He was trying to spell the word "bike." Of all words, I thought he would know this one, but he tried to switch the letter "k" and the letter "e" (biek). He named bikes, cars, and video games at the top of the list. As we continued to talk, I realized he really knew them well. He named cars and talked about motors and engines and how he worked on repairing his BMX bikes and made roll-bar cages for carts that he and a friend pulled each other around in behind their bikes. BMX stands for "Bike Motocross" (I actually had to research it). This is a type of dirt bike racing. Mark was very knowledgeable about this topic. Through our discussions, I discovered he raced, repaired, and built these bikes. I was very impressed. I knew a little about this sport, but it was obvious he was passionate about BMX biking. Mark told me all about the location at Bryant Park beside the zoo. I had him log into the computer to research the subject. We learned that City F has one of the few BMX tracks in the state. We looked at pictures and he explained the purpose of the banks and hills. He shared so much about the races and his trips to the track. I was overwhelmed with his words and my thoughts. Then his voice changed to frustration as he told me about several break-ins. The track had a building for bathrooms, concessions, and storage. They rented BMX bikes to participants for the day so that everyone could come and ride. There were no requirements or registrations. It sounded very kid-friendly. But with the bikes stolen, they had to cancel several racing events. Mark began to talk about the poor fencing that was falling down in one place and the building not having security. And that was when I found his critical stance. He obviously had an opinion about the matter and a personal connection to the problem. I began asking specific questions: "Why do people break into the park? Why is theft an issue? Who should be involved? Who gets hurt by this? What can you do to consciously engage yourself? How can you take responsibility to inquire?" It was like opening a flood gate. He oozed with information and poured out ideas about the bikes being expensive; without bikes, the kids couldn't race and it wasn't fair. He suggested that they need a new fence or security cameras to keep thieves out. It was obvious we had found his interest and its social connection to make a critical stance.

After a long and in-depth conversation, I gave him a homework assignment for writing a summary about the history

of BMX biking. We decided we would go to the library to collect books on the subject. We would read more books and write an informative letter with ideas for improving the park security. We looked for biking books. We also decided to find books on security systems and fencing for additional information. Mark was eager to do the computer research. In the end, we left with six books. He chose one to read at home that could help with his summary. Mark returned with his summary. I asked him to read it aloud to me. He struggled through some of the words mostly because he realized they were spelled wrong. I encouraged him to rewrite the summary. The original had the misspelled words highlighted and the second one had them circled. Several things to note were how he omitted letters or included the letter "e." I also observed that he capitalized all of the letters "t" and "l" regardless of their placement in the word. We used all of his misspelled words to add to the journal and discussed how certain chunks remain the same for each word (e.g., "tr" in track; "ing" in racing; and "wh" in while). It was a compare-and-contrast activity, using written words to visualize the placement of letters and oral pronunciation to hear the letter sounds. We also discussed when to use "their" or "there." He wrote them in his journal and I explained that one represents ownership and the other, location. This went very well. I decided to have him read a second book silently and then we would do a compare-and-contrast of the two books along with a retell for comprehension. This activity was interesting because he began to describe the designs of the bikes and how the frames are made specifically for their use in snow or dirt. He even got out some paper and a ruler and drew the different frame shapes for me. He explained their parts on the diagrams. It was amazing. We talked about how this was like science or physics and there was some math involved with the angles used. He laughed when I told him we had done science, history, and math, using bikes. It was time to move into the letter writing portion of his critical stance.

I wanted to show him that a critical stance was more than reading about bikes and writing a letter. There was unfairness to others in the theft of the bikes. He may not have lost his bike, but other kids would miss out on racing. This was unjust. He was affected because several events were cancelled. I guided him to this understanding through our conversation. We discussed how he could get involved with fund-raising for money or by getting

the ABA (American Bike Association) to donate money. This was new for him and his insecurity showed. Mark was very quiet and sometimes I wondered if I coached him too much, but I felt he needed the guidance to identify multiple views on the matter.

We discussed the audience we were writing to and we had three options: the ABA, the City F Park Department, or the Track Director. Mark chose the Track Director because he said, "That's the guy who makes the decisions and has the power to change things." *Well put. He was right and we talked about how he could actually meet this person and talk about his ideas. Mark was apprehensive again. He seemed so unsure of himself and he may have never been in a position to make a change in something. He did not believe his letter would matter. I hoped as we began organizing the letter, his motivation would improve. We talked about the structure and I modeled why an introduction about who he was would be needed before the main body. We brainstormed all possible options for keeping the park secure and used our books from the library to generate ideas. We included a paragraph for tips on the expenses of the security measures suggested and a closing to say thanks. After we created a written rough draft, Mark wanted to type it on the computer because he was concerned about his writing and spelling. I left him to do this activity alone. I encouraged him to use good details in his sentences. After typing this draft, I guided him with questions to prompt more information from him. We also discussed spelling errors, sounded-out words, and we slowed down to help him focus. I showed him how to create lists in his letter to organize his security suggestions. With the final letter finished, we talked about sending the letter. Mark was still unsure of himself and whether he could make a difference. In the end, we decided to mail it to the Park Director (see Appendix A for the letter).*

In all honesty, I was skeptical about critical literacy. I couldn't fully grasp the concept until we finished reading the entire textbook (Lewison et al., 2008). There were great examples and stories from actual teachers with a variety of activities. Each of them was unique. I learned that a critical stance isn't only about complaining and arguing or discussing controversial topics. It is about speaking up and getting involved in things that were somehow wronging people. This happens daily, so it isn't hard to find an issue for discussion. I only wish I had more time to explore additional aspects with Mark and to help him discover

his role for being actively involved in changing the world around him.

A Reflection

In this project, Becky found that her student Mark, who usually was reluctant to write due to his poor phonics skills, was passionate about BMX biking. Mark was also concerned about the break-ins at the building located near the track at Bryant Park where bikes were rented. Mark was affected because several racing events were cancelled due to this security problem. Becky spotted the issue in which Mark was interested, and linked it to her critical literacy project. She began to co-research the issue with Mark. They ended up writing a letter to the Track Director, suggesting measures that could be taken to prevent bikes from being stolen. Through this project, Mark became not only a writer but a critical literacist who knew how to use literacy to make a difference in his and other people's lives.

From Becky and Mark, we learn that critical literacy is not just for students who are capable of doing so-called higher-level thinking. Becky's willingness to step beyond her comfort zone broadened her perspective on literacy education. It also helped Mark experience different aspects of literacy to which he was never exposed. Most importantly, Mark was able to begin with what Freire (1984) calls generative words (e.g., bike) and to build his critical inquiry on them. He was empowered to explore as well as impact the world of literacy. Through this project, Mark became a creator rather than a mere receiver of literacy. Becky and Mark's project was a documentation of how a classroom teacher and student tried to explore the meaning and potentiality of critical literacy in the classroom as well as in their daily lives. Though critical literacy has been around for decades, it appears to exist more in the literature than in the classroom practices. Consequently, before we can "do" critical literacy, we need to be at least open to it and assume, as Harste suggests in the beginning of this paper, that one of the tenets we have about literacy education is wrong.

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Appendix A: Mark's Letter to The Track Director

Dear Sir,

Hi, my name is Mark. I am fourteen years old. I live in City N and I like to race at the track. When I was about seven, I started to ride my bike on ramps. Then when I got older, I wanted to race my bike. Then my dad started taking me to the track. I like the track because it is fast and fun to race on.

I have been concerned about the robberies at the track. When the bikes are stolen, some kids won't get to race and have fun at the track. I don't know if you have a security system, but I think it would be a good idea to have one. I have eight good ideas to help the track to not get robbed so much.

1. You can put razor wire or something like that at the top of the fence because it would make it harder to get in.
2. You can put a camera system inside and outside to be able to record the person breaking in.
3. You can put in ADT alarms to scare away the robber.
4. Motion lights can come on when people get near the building.
5. You could chain all of the bikes together in the building.
6. You could post warning signs on the fencing.
7. Dogs would scare people away at night.
8. You can put GPS chips in the bike so if they get stolen you can find them.

I know that my ideas are expensive but you could do a fund raiser to help get the money for the things that you want. You can ask the ABA or the City F Park Department to pay for some of it. Maybe I would be able to help at a fund raiser.

I hope that all of my ideas can be helpful to you and other bikers.

Sincerely,
Mark

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