

Critical literacy:
a novice teacher in an urban classroom

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iv
CHAPTER ONE	1
INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background to the Study	3
1.2 The Focus of the Investigation	6
1.3 Outline of the Chapters	9
1.4 Conclusion	11
CHAPTER TWO	14
THE STATE OF LITERACY EDUCATION IN QUEBEC	14
2.1 A Brief Background of the Reform	16
2.2 Literacy in Québec's Curriculum	21
2.3 Conclusion	29
CHAPTER THREE	31
CRITICAL LITERACY	31
3.1 Critical Literacy Defined	33
3.2 The Start of My Literacy Life	37
3.3 A Place to Start in Today's Classroom	42
3.4 Conclusion	44
CHAPTER FOUR	46
WE ARE THE STORIES WE TELL: A MIXED-METHODOLOGY	46
4.1 Subjectivity	49
4.2 Critical Incidents	50
4.3 Personal Narrative Inquiry	51
4.4 Autoethnography	53
4.5 Conclusion	55
CHAPTER FIVE	57
REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD	57
5.1 The Context	58
5.2 Critical Incident One: Catholics Only	60
5.3 Reflection on Catholics Only	62
5.4 Critical Incident Two: Dear Prime Minister	63
5.5 Reflections on Dear Prime Minister	66
5.6 Critical Incident Three: Rainbow of Dreams	67
5.7 Reflections on Rainbow of Dreams	69
5.8 Conclusion	71
CHAPTER SIX	73
CONCLUSION	73
6.1 What We Need to Remember	73
6.2 Where We Need to Go Next	77
BIBLIOGRAPHY	79

Abstract

This thesis in part examines the efforts of a teacher to bring critical literacy to life in a classroom and also defines and critiques the use of this pedagogical practice within Québec's Anglophone schools. Critical literacy is often referred to in many government based curriculums across Canada, and especially within Québec's Anglophone document; however whether or not it is enacted in the classroom is challenged. By primary means of reflection on three critical incidents of teaching and examination into professional practices what is revealed is that far too often teachers are convinced they are enacting the emancipatory purpose of critical literacy, but in reality, due to personal and outside (peers, administration, community) censorship the pedagogical act is greatly diluted. Standardized programs developed outside of Canada, like Success for All or the Daily Five, which are used in many Anglophone school boards, are used as examples of how critical literacy is often misunderstood and misappropriated. In brief, by primary means of personal narrative reflection and a review of the literature, the author examines whether or not critical literacy, as defined from a critical pedagogy position, can be found within the Québec's English Schools and what barriers exist to hinder its implementation.

Cette thèse, en partie, examine les efforts d'un enseignant d'apporter l'alphabétisation critique à la vie dans une classe. De plus, ce dernier définit et critique l'utilisation de cette pratique pédagogique dans les écoles anglophones au Québec. L'alphabétisation critique est souvent mentionnée dans plusieurs programmes d'études gouvernementaux à travers le Canada, et particulièrement au sein du document anglophone du Québec ; par contre, la mise en place de ce dernier dans une classe est contestée. Par le principal moyen de réflexion sur trois incidents critiques de l'enseignement et à l'examen dans les pratiques professionnelles ce qui est révélé est que trop souvent les enseignants sont convaincus qu'ils décrètent le but émancipateur de l'alphabétisation, mais en réalité, due à la censure personnelle et extérieure (les pairs, l'administration, la communauté) l'acte pédagogique est fortement dilué. Les programmes normalisés développés en dehors du Canada, comme « *Success for All* » ou « *The Daily Five* », qui sont employés dans de nombreuses commissions scolaires anglophones, sont utilisées comme exemples pour démontrer comment l'alphabétisation est souvent mal comprise et détournée. Bref, par des moyens primaires de réflexion narrative personnelle et d'une révision de la littérature, l'auteure examine si l'alphabétisation, tel que défini par la position d'une critique pédagogique, peut être retrouvée dans les écoles anglaises au Québec et quels sont les obstacles existant qui empêchent sa mise en œuvre.

Dedication

To my children, Farah-Roxanne, Cyrus and Yasmina. Thanks for not making too much noise
while Mommy was studying and writing!

Acknowledgement

To Joe who was with me at the start of this journey, Shirley who was there to see me to the end,
and Christopher who never once left my side.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

A critical conversation begins

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry (we) pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

Paulo Freire, 1971

In the fall of 1992 a wide eyed naive young woman sat on a teacher's desk scanning an empty classroom in a public elementary school located in the inner-city of Montreal, Québec. Having recently graduated from the Department of Education at McGill University she was filled with ideas of how she was going to make a difference in the lives of her students. With a box full of illustrated picture books and a file folder of activities she knew that she was where she was meant to be and that the next few months were going to be the best ones of her life. After all, she had been so successful in her suburban neighbourhood working with the children at her local church, community pool and park; the perfect archetype of the North American teacher. How different could it be teaching children in this milieu? They would love her and all that she was going to bring to them.

Fast forward a month.

A young man sits on the second floor balcony of his apartment in Notre-Dame de Grace, Montreal. He has just returned from teaching a day of physical education to some elementary aged children. It has been a good day. He calmly strums away a melody on his guitar humming and thinking carefree thoughts. His eyes look out down the adjacent street and he sees an old woman who appears to be not only carrying two heavy bags in her hands but the weight of the world on her shoulders as well. He watches as she shuffles along for a couple of steps, lays

down her burdens and with shoulders shaking obviously sobs before continuing on her way. He is filled with empathy for what this poor old thing must be dealing with. Suddenly, he sits up. A dawning recognition sweeps over him. As the figure approaches, he realizes that it is not some aged bag lady but his girlfriend coming home from her teaching day.

Whatever preparation that young woman thought she had, whatever advantage of race, socioeconomic status, religion (and even gender in the elementary school environment) she possessed, did not prepare her for the challenges of the urban/inner-city schools and clientele. Those dreams, my dreams, of sharing my love for language arts came to a crashing halt in a context I, given my university education, had little right in which to teach. Much like the Native students that are bound by their pseudo university degrees to only teach within reserves, after a time, I found myself wondering why my degree did not specify limiting my teaching boundaries to only reproducing education to those like me.

It is my hope that the following thesis will add to the strong body of literature that focuses on the use of critical pedagogy in today's North American urban/inner-city classrooms (NB: I use "inner-city" because the Montreal/Québec ministry of education officially uses this term and this thesis is set within this environment). Using a mixed- methodology approach that combines predominately personal narrative reflection and gestures to autoethnography using critical incidents as a vehicle, I will forward multiple reflective anecdotes highlighting my struggles in teaching critical literacy in an elementary English Language Arts setting.

Be forewarned, what you are about to read is not a success story. So those of you hoping to cheer alongside another Erin Gruwel (Freedom Writers) or LouAnne Johnson (Dangerous Minds) should probably stop here. Those of you who choose to continue reading will be invited

into the memories and experiences of a neophyte teacher who fumbled her way through the first years of her career and came away having learned so much more from her mistakes than any university textbook could hope to achieve.

Background to the study

Mrs. Stevens was strict. Mrs. Stevens scowled. Mrs. Stevens got after her students. Mrs. Stevens had fiery red hair. Mrs. Stevens was not most people's favourite teacher but ...she was mine because Mrs. Stevens loved reading!

When I think back to my time at Windermere Elementary , a public primary school located in a predominately White Anglo Saxon Protestant upper middle class suburb in the West Island of Montreal, Québec, one of my fondest memories is my year in grade 2 in Mrs. Steven's class. Every so often she would gather us all around her and I would become lost in another time and another place. We would embark on countless adventures and meet many new friends; friends with whom we would share laughter, fear, anger and at times tears.

There was something magical about those stolen moments between math stencils and spelling lists. It was a time like no other. I can see myself as if it were yesterday sitting cross-legged listening with every inch of my body to the sound of Mrs. Stevens' voice. I was drawn in. I was hooked. The only thing that could break the spell was the sound of the book being closed. A collective groan of disappointment would follow and then off we would go quietly back to our desks, back to SRA and workbooks (the prescribed standard form of reading instruction during the 1970s), biding our time until the next read aloud would sweep us away between the pages to learn more about ourselves, others and the world in which we lived.

Mrs. Stevens was the first teacher that I had who awoke in me the inkling that there was something special that could happen between a teacher and a group of students. At the age of seven, she nudged open the door to learning and invited me to enter. Throughout my educational career, there have been other women who have come into my life, each one unique, each one a teacher, each one willing to take the time and care to nurture me as their student. And due to each one of my experiences with them that I am forever changed.

Lynn Butler-Kisber was my very first professor at McGill University (Montreal, Canada). I was fortunate to have her for an entire year, back when English Language Arts was a 6 credit course. I will never forget her quick step as she entered the classroom pushing her cart filled with goodies...picture books, manipulatives and movies of her days in the classroom. I loved that class and I loved Lynn. I wanted to be Lynn. I would sit there totally mesmerised by her stories. She would read to us, she would talk to us, she would share with us and all the while she would prompt us to think for ourselves, to consider our opinions, our connections, and what we were going to do once we were out there in the field with a class of our own. It was the questions that we had to ask of ourselves and our students as we turned the pages of the beautifully illustrated picture books. We learned not to only appreciate what the text had to offer but the responses and conversations that we brought to and from the text. Rich dialogue that pushed us to look, interpret and become more aware. Critical literacy in action before I even knew what critical literacy was.

Abigail Anderson, architect and writer of the English Language Arts curriculum for Québec's teachers. Strong, opinionated, passionate and brilliant. There was never a day or evening that I left her presence without having learned something new and usually it was more than one thing. Wow! She made my head spin. How could someone know so much about

literacy? How could she time and again speak so eloquently and always draw reference to both theorists and novelists alike in order to get her point across? I would hurry home and look up the person, the quote or the book that she had offered. I knew that I could be a fearless teacher and take the risks required to implement a Freireian pedagogy because that was the pedagogy on which our very ELA curriculum was based. She believed in critical literacy and she put her money where her mouth was by having it live and breathe in the Québec Education Program that she had envisioned.

Janet Radoman had the patience of a saint with her students. She was a true teacher. She was gifted in the ability to take anything, no matter how convoluted and explain it in such a way that everyone present could understand and then apply. She was a constructivist in action, an advocate for her students and a champion for the unheard and voiceless. She was the teacher that would throw away a planned afternoon math lesson if a child of hers entered the classroom sweaty with excitement and full of questions regarding the fistful of worms they had found in the schoolyard after a lunchtime rain shower. She not only listened to her students, she engaged them in critical conversations, inquiry and dialogue. What her students thought and felt mattered. This is what she believed and this is how she taught. Together, student and teacher, they would venture into the unknown; learning, living and discovering all that this crazy, wonderful world had to offer.

Shirley Steinberg, a woman that no one forgets once they meet her. Being in her presence was like riding a Tsunami, both awesome and frightening at the same time. I remember reading her work, I remember listening to her address groups of university students, I remember conversations in her kitchen and I remember always wondering how someone could have the energy and ability to do so much for so many and ask for nothing in return. She had presence,

she had an uncanny understanding of what needed to be done to fight the fight and she was going to do it and get others to join in the cause no matter what. "...it is with that uncomfortability that we will teach."(2007) I read this line over and over again. This is what she did. This is what most of us are incapable of doing...ever. And yet, this is what she did in every aspect of her research, her teaching, her writing, her speaking and her life. This was a woman who believed in Freire, who knew Freire and who embodied radical teaching with every waking breath.

These are the women that have prompted me daily to think more deeply about what needs to occur in our Language Arts classrooms today, tomorrow and the days after that. They have shaped me into the reflective practitioner and active critical pedagogue I am today and the better one I hope to become. It is due to their teaching and their actions that I write this thesis. Their deep appreciation and dedication to the field of literacy is what drives my own passion and desire to read, write and discuss the steps all teachers can take to advance their practice and strengthen their profession by incorporating critical literacy into their English Language Arts curriculum.

The Focus of the Investigation

I was born in Québec, Canada in the late sixties to parents of Ontario-Anglophone descent. We lived in the West Island of Montreal, a notoriously middle class Anglophone enclave. Our neighbours were Anglophone, our family friends were Anglophone, our community activities were run by Anglophones and I attend school in English. I loved school! I still to this day get excited by the smell of a box of fresh crayons and I drive my own children crazy as I drag them into paper supply stores to purchase pens, copybooks, pencil cases and other classroom material for the upcoming school year just as the preceding one is ending.

For me, school was a safe environment, something that I looked forward to: my mother laying clothes out for the first day was a joy (Stonebanks & Stonebanks, 2008). I was a good student. Reading and writing came without too much effort and I sailed through school with very little stress or anxiety. Of course, it's easy to play the game well when you fit so comfortably into the system that was designed by and for people similar to yourself.

I was secure with who I was because I already belonged without even knowing it. Sitting in the lecture halls surrounded by other girls that looked like me and thought like me we didn't really need to listen to what was being discussed at the podium because in our minds we were already teachers. We knew what we wanted to do; we wanted our future students to enjoy school and love it as much as we did. None of us thought twice about how identity is constructed in the social setting of schools beyond the warm fuzzy "feel good" feelings that we all shared. We were ready to impart our knowledge onto our students; truth about the world and truth about their place in the world was our responsibility, our role as their teacher. (Stonebanks & Stonebanks, 2008, pp.7-8)

Graduating in 1992 from McGill University's Bachelor of Education and Reading Certificate programs lead to classrooms located in the inner city of Montreal. For the first time, I was leaving the comfortability of my White Anglo Saxon Protestant upbringing and heading into the unknown of multicultural, urban city life. It didn't take long to realize that the game I so easily played and was prepared to pass on to those under my care was not going to work in this milieu. Teaching these children to simply decode and recreate standardized texts would in no way assist them in their development of understanding the world in which they lived or their place in it. I needed to go deeper. I needed to implement a literacy curriculum that would allow these students the possibility to find their voice, to read between the lines and to ask the questions that would advance their learning like nothing else could.

If situations cannot be created that enable the young to deal with feelings of being manipulated by outside forces, there will be far too little sense of agency among them. Without a sense of agency, young people are unlikely to pose significant questions, the existentially rooted questions in which learning begins. (Green, 1988)

According to Giroux (1992), much of the current debate regarding the improvement of minority student academic achievement occurs at a level that treats education as a primarily technical issue. As such, the solution to this problem tends to be constructed in primarily methodological and mechanistic terms removed from the sociocultural reality that shapes it. There is a common belief that the answer lies in finding the “right” teaching method, strategies, or pre-packaged curricula that will work with students who do not respond to so called “regular” or “normal” instruction (Bartolome, 2008). It is also faulty to believe that by simply repeating programs that have been successful elsewhere will result in positive student outcomes in a low-socioeconomic context especially when considering a population that has historically been “mistreated and miseducated” by the education system.

Perhaps one of the most important ideas that one must bear in mind is the fact that “the idea of a ‘universal’ type of literacy skill...that can be applied in all...life situations” (Maddox, 2001, p.148) is not a ‘fact’ or ‘truth’. My aim was to steer away from what Maria de la Luz Reyes (1992) calls a “one size fits all” curriculum and as Kincheloe notes, ends up fitting nobody (2003, p. 4). Nothing good will ever amount from generic teaching methods as instruction for any group of students, not only those at risk, needs to be individualized to some extent. This ‘one size fits all’ idea of literacy is extremely problematic because it does not take into account the important differences and variety of needs that each individual person, country and culture has. Flavour of the month programs like “The Daily Five”(Boushey & Moser, 2006) give

teachers and parents the illusion that these “new” methods hold magical powers that all on their own will bring about an increase in student achievement if they are implemented properly along with all the training and resource material that are part of the package. Instead of buying into the marketing machine, and implementing a program that will no doubt lose its appeal after the initial burst of enthusiasm and motivation due to novelty have worn off, I propose to dialogue with the stakeholders and look honestly at the historical and current day educational concerns, realities, struggles and dreams of their students, parents and teachers.

Edelsky (1991) and Powell (1999) argue that skills-based instruction – which gives the semblance of being neutral – in reality, serves the purpose to obscure the gatekeeping function of language instruction in schools. Children who have figured out how to play the “reading exercise game” and can easily figure out the norms of “doing school” (p.120) are more likely to succeed than students who are nonmainstream and considered “at risk”.

Powell believes strongly in an emancipatory literacy that “releases us from the bondage of disillusionment, inciting us to challenge the immobilizing forces of inertia that surround us and pursue new avenues for resistance” (pg. 98). She states this is a literacy that “legitimizes all voices, that affirms students’ languages, and that penetrates the invisibility of hegemony.” Simon (1992, p. 141) refers to this form of transformative literacy as one that embraces “a project of possibility”.

Outline of the Chapters

The following chapters will take an in-depth look at the history and theory behind Critical literacy, how it fits into Québec’s Education Program and a reflection of how I, as a classroom

teacher, attempted to enact a project of possibility with my elementary classroom. Perhaps though, of foremost importance to this research, is the consideration of the journey and the mishaps along the way of a novice teacher; who learned more about teaching and learning from her students than she ever could have from years of study and research.

The thesis will be broken down into five distinct yet interrelated chapters. Each one a piece of a conversation, each one a thoughtful and reflective investigation, each one contributing to a richer picture of literacy in today's elementary classrooms – what has been done, what should be done and how to go about getting it done.

Chapter Two offers a brief glimpse into the background and highlights of the curriculum in place today in our Québec classrooms. That will be followed by an overview of the role Literacy plays in the Québec Education Program. It will become clear to the reader that what the intention was and what actually plays out in our classrooms are not always the same.

Chapter Three will move into the area of Freire's vision of an emancipatory curriculum highlighted through the use of critical literacy. My own personal literacy life will be explored culminating in what critical literacy might look like in an elementary classroom.

Chapter Four will delve into the world of mixed-methodology, interweaving personal narrative, auto ethnography, and critical incidents. All three will be defined and defended as to why it is a perfect fit for this professional reflective study.

Chapter Five will invite the reader into a place and time where a young teacher, fitting the image of "lady bountiful" (Cavanagh & Harper, 1994), attempts to understand her place in the classroom and society, share her passion for literacy and come to terms with the pitfalls and successes while teaching a group of urban/inner-city youths to find their voice in order to

develop a sense of who they are and how to build in them a desire to find their place in the world. The chapter will be broken down into the context of my teaching environment, three separate yet connected critical incidents from my classroom experience and reflections on each one.

Finally, Chapter Six will summarize the research and outcomes from the study, consider how to assist other teachers to put Critical Literacy into practice in their classrooms and finally culminate with suggestions for future research.

Conclusion

I am quick to state at the outset that I by no means profess to have been a model teacher. I must admit that I hate it when my husband, Christopher Darius Stonebanks, compares his experience going to the same schools as I did. After all, his elementary school was not only within the same school board, but was a mere five to ten blocks away from my own and we went to the same high school. How is it possible that his schooling experiences differed so much from my own? However, I am well aware that our individual student histories did much to shape how we approached teaching in the system a number of years later.

For Melanie, a person who loved her elementary school experience, anything that approached critical perspectives of her beloved home away from home was a personal affront. For Christopher, a person who felt elementary school was something to endure, theory of education provided an exploratory window into understanding experience and changing schools. Certainly, the fact that we both grew up in a homogeneous, White, Christian, middle class neighbourhood and until some ten years ago, public schools in Québec, Canada were either

streamed as Protestant or Catholic, played an integral role in our experiences in school, as Melanie was a reflection of the system and Christopher was not. (Stonebanks & Stonebanks, 2008, p.2)

The years I spent teaching in the elementary classroom were fraught with many inner battles of attempting to make sense of the disconnect between my personal school and home life experiences and those of my students. Our lives, in almost every way seemed to be dissimilar and therefore the ideals that I brought with me into their classroom did not always serve them in the best possible way. My memories though of my years in the classroom are happy ones that I will cherish forever. And, having bumped into one of my former grade 2 students in the elevator at McGill University, in her final year of the Bachelor of Education program, where she told me that I was the reason she had decided to go into the field of teaching, I am confident that I was able to successfully support the learning of my young charges. Add to that a phone call from one of my husband's university students who had decided to enter into the field of education despite her family repeatedly telling her that it would be too difficult a battle for a young Muslim woman sporting a hejab. She had been a grade 5 student of mine during my first year of teaching. I had brought my husband into my urban/inner-city class on a variety of occasions for support and "street cred" as his brown skin and Iranian, Muslim heritage gave me an instant stamp of approval in this multicultural milieu. It was actually his presence in the classroom that allowed this young Pakistani Muslim girl to see herself in the role of teacher. It was a naive and even shoddy attempt at acceptance, but in the absence of any efforts by other teachers to even try and bridge the wide chasm of "them vs. us", it worked. All I wanted to do was try and get the children to love reading and writing as much as I did, and rather than think critically about the subject, material and the methods, my attempts focussed on building relationships. Not that this is an unworthy goal, but in the absence of the aforementioned aspects

to critically examine, what I was basically imparting was a sentiment of “trust me and you’ll see that I am, ‘we’ are right”, rather than questioning the foundation and purpose of literacy.

Were I to return to the classroom, would I do things differently now? Would I be more in tuned with the reality of what I needed to do to create a curriculum that fostered critical literacy so that my students would be able to transfer their questions and perspectives from the safety of the classroom into the outside world? Would I be a better reflective practionner, able to observe and analyze the teaching and learning exchanges taking place on a daily basis in order to modify and improve my craft? The answer that comes without any surprise is most definitely.

However, I feel that it is important to re-examine and reflect on my early years in the field, mistakes and all, so that I might at least be an example of how living, loving and learning about critical literacy is a never-ending evolution and that each and every one of us have the ability to ourselves be a project of possibility.

Chapter 2 – The State of Literacy Education in Québec

Critical conversations with curriculum

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred... to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.

bell hooks, 1994

In the fall of 2008, I had the privilege of taking a graduate course with Joe Kincheloe. It was a time in my life that I will never forget. He would sit at the head of the semi-circle, clad in black jeans and a black t-shirt and he would talk to us...no, tell us stories is probably more accurate. Wonderfully spun narratives of his personal experiences in schools would eat up the three hour block in no time at all. He had such a way about him that you never realized how much you were learning about theories and methodologies by simply listening to his anecdotes. In any other circumstance, the idea of listening to a professor week after week, lecturing solo for three hours straight would seem like Hell. In Joe's presence it was like academic heaven.

One thing was clear, he was not impressed with the manner in which schools operated and the overtly discriminatory practices that occurred throughout our North American system. He spoke of the issues of a standardized curriculum where so many students were simply left out of the equation due to their gender, race, ethnicity, religion, orientation or social status and of teachers who were forced by the government to push a curriculum that they knew would fail so many of their students.

One evening, half way through the semester, a number of my colleagues, who were not from Québec, joined in on the conversation, angrily claiming that they understood exactly what Joe was talking about. They ranted openly about the problems we had here in Québec as our curriculum was without question as standardized as others throughout the rest of Canada and the United States. I was shocked by their statement. How could anyone who had read this document claim that it was standardized when the very underlying philosophy promoted teacher professionalism and autonomy by advocating self selection of pedagogy, resources, methods and evaluation? It became clear to me that they hadn't read the document. And when I asked this question outright, the answer that echoed around the room was that indeed they hadn't.

Months later, while grieving the loss of my beloved friend Joe Kincheloe, I was sitting in Shirley's living room at their home in Mount Tremblant, when their son Chaim walked into the room holding onto his laptop. His eyes were wide in disbelief as he scanned the screen. Looking up from his reading of The Québec Education Program he exclaimed in disbelief "Hey, did you know that Freire is quoted in here?" I chuckled out loud. Here was the son of two of the most prevalent minds in critical pedagogy, not to mention a successful English Secondary School teacher, and he was just now realizing that the curriculum he was teaching was based on the theories and ideology of Paulo Freire.

What struck home at this point was that here was a curriculum document that was almost ten years into implementation and it was still being referred to as "The Reform" or even "New" and added to that was the reality that so many in the field of education, from classroom teachers to critical pedagogues, had never taken the time to sit down and read it through. This could be one possible reason why there is such a disconnect between what is supposed to be occurring in our schools and the reality of what is taking place.

What follows is a brief outline of The Québec Education Program presently in full implementation in all of our public elementary and secondary schools throughout Québec. To finish up the chapter, we will take a look into the state of literacy in Québec and how the instruction of this essential skill is supposed to be played out in our classrooms according to our English Language Arts curriculum.

A Brief Background of the Reform

In the fall of 2000, Québec began the implementation of its third wave of curriculum reform in the past thirty years. The first, occurring in the 1960s during the Quiet Revolution, was one of modernization and an opening up of curriculum. According to Henchey (1999),

It introduced a new structure of elementary and secondary education, abolished separate secondary streams, recommended "activist" methods in elementary school, and established comprehensive high schools and subject promotion, all in keeping with the progressive educational spirit of the era. (p. 1)

There was literally a “tearing down of the walls” in the education system to promote an open education environment. As a grade one student at this time, my school reflected this ideology not only in practice, as our teachers worked collaboratively with one and other on large and small group projects, but in architecture as well as there were no walls separating my classroom from the other grade one class behind me. I vividly remember turning around in my seat to watch the other teacher in action when I lost focus of the lesson in front of me.

The second wave however, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, “involved centralization of control and detailed programs, reflecting the back-to-basics movement of that era” (Henchey, 1999, p. 1).

The current educational reform, now over ten years in place, is comparable to that of the 1960s with a distinctive restructuring of not only the programs and teaching procedures but the philosophy behind them as well. “...there is a movement from centralization to decentralization and from detailed program requirements to more open-ended and adaptable provincial guidelines. Both reforms place a good deal of reliance on the competence and initiative of teachers and principals.” (Henchey, 1999, p. 4) The philosophical thrust of the Québec Education Program (QEP) emphasized the importance of knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, inquiry-based learning, collaboration, cross-curricular learning, and democratic living. It was essentially “aimed to take the emphasis off of rote memorization in favour of teaching children how to learn. (Gazette, 2008)

According to numerous documents produced by The Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS), one fact remained clear “teachers must truly take ownership of the education reform in order for its implementation to be a success.” (MELS, 2005 p. 9) It quickly became obvious to all involved, that there were many elements of the QEP being implemented that would profoundly alter the teaching and learning in Québec schools. For one thing, it accorded greater recognition to the professional autonomy of teachers by allowing them to determine their choice of teaching tools, teaching methods, and choice of methods of evaluation of students' learning (MELS, 2005, p. 8). As well, it allowed teachers to choose their pedagogical approaches according to the situation, the nature of the learning to be accomplished or the students' characteristics. This could be managed by lecturing, explicit instruction, project-

based teaching, inductive teaching, strategic instruction, cooperative learning or any other method the teacher deemed appropriate. (MELS, 2005)

For the first time in my career, this progressive ideological shift was putting the teachers in control of their own instruction. It was affording them the opportunity to be autonomous professionals in their classrooms. Who knew better than the teacher him/herself what was best for their students? What this transfer of power movement should have brought was cheers and galvanized support but instead many teachers reacted with anger, frustration and panic. Numerous school board workshops across the province attempted to quell these fears by emphasizing how this curriculum would benefit not only themselves but their students as well bringing all involved into the 21st century.

People should not fear this program; it is intended to expose students to competencies that they can transfer to real-life contexts beyond the classroom. It also stresses the importance of essential knowledge that must be acquired in order to gain understanding of various concepts and phenomena. To this end, it is a program that emphasizes both the “what” and the “how.” It offers curricula that are designed for the fast pace of the 21st Century when information is constantly in flux and the work force is facing new and exciting challenges that our young people must be prepared for (ibid, p. 8).

What this essentially entailed was in order to carry out the Québec education reform, teachers would have to shift from a paradigm of teaching to a paradigm of learning. The role of teachers became one of supporting students in their learning process, helping them structure and build on their knowledge, rather than being the expert who transmits information.

As well, because we're working with complex situations, the teachers do not have all the answers. This creates interesting learning opportunities for the students, who wonder, 'How do you go about finding the answers? How can you tell if the information found is trustworthy?' (MELS, 2001, p. 2)

In examining the culture of the North American teacher, Québec included, Stonebanks (2008) writes that privileged knowledge in schools continues to be a power that teachers are reluctant to give up. Moreover, in examining the works of Apple and Kincheloe, he argues that even teachers who are in favour of implementing this paradigm shift are unable to do so due to the crushing banking of knowledge atmosphere that exist in most schools that relegate teaching to a quasi-profession at best. This analysis critiques the ability of the teaching profession to enact such a fundamental change to the core of who becomes a teacher and what it means to teach.

The role of the student also changes in the shift to a learning paradigm. Students will be encouraged to participate in constructing their knowledge. "Instead of mostly listening, they are actively engaged in processing the information so as to transform it into knowledge and competencies." They may even act as experts in cases where they have specific knowledge. (MELS, 2001, p. 2) Of course, this will only take place if teachers are willing to let it occur. For many in the teaching profession the "letting go of the reins" is a challenge to say the least. Countless years of training and affirmation that they are the ones to impart the knowledge onto their young charges results in hard habits to break. Stepping to the background and taking the role of facilitator while supporting the students in their personal quest for understanding will take thoughtful deliberate implementation and effort in order for it to come to fruition.

In this innovative way of looking at teaching and learning, of primary concern is that students transform information into viable and transferable knowledge "The elements of knowledge students develop are tools that should help them understand and take action in the

world,”(MELS, 2001, p.1). Learning does not simply take place in the classroom. It does not begin and end with the ringing of the bells, “...the reform aims for learning that takes place in school to be transferable, i.e. to serve a purpose other than just school.” (MELS, 2001 p. 2).

On a final note, in order to complete a clear picture of the curriculum presently being lived out in Québec for all students in elementary and secondary schools, it must be stated that as a system, the Québec Education Program is a dynamic whole the scope of which is based on the complementarity and intersection of its components. From preschool to the end of secondary school, the Québec Education Program entails the following key elements:

- targets the development of student competencies, generic competencies (cross-curricular) and more specific ones (disciplinary) without neglecting the role of knowledge in the development of these competencies;
- targets the development of these three same competencies in a compulsory discipline, from the start of elementary school to the end of secondary school (with some exceptions);
- is designed around contemporary world problems;
- accords major importance to mastering the language of instruction;
- is intended to be a student gateway to culture;
- addresses all students, taking into account the heterogeneity that is characteristic of all groups;
- is based on the expertise of all school personnel and allows for individual and collective professional choices. (Guimond, 2009, pp. 2-3)

It is a reform that has been the source of much anger, revolt and frustration. It goes without saying that having teachers take into consideration a program that implies a major adaptation on the pedagogic level has been anything but easy. We must be patient and keep in mind that changes of such magnitude cannot be implemented into a machine as vast as the

educational network over a short period of time or without experiencing some difficulties. Many have questioned whether or not the disruption and disorder brought about by this shift has been worth it. I am reminded of Margaret Meek, who in referring to Freire writes “and He wants us to consider the worth of an idea by asking what difference it would make” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. xxvii). When looking at the pedagogic basis and the potential outcomes for students being educated in this way, I think it will make an enormous difference in the way that teachers and students come together to share in the learning process, to dialogue and to empower each other and themselves. So my answer to the question “Is it worth it?” rings out loud and clear “Yes, it is most definitely worth it!”

But the question remains, why has this not occurred? Why has a program that shifts away from a standardized curriculum to one of empowerment and autonomy met with so much resistance and resentment? Teachers’ voices demanding textbooks and implementing pre-packaged reading programs into their classrooms far outnumber those who believe in the power and sense of self that an emancipatory curriculum can impart. Is it conscious, disconscious or simply being unaware? That remains to be seen but is most certainly the basis for further research down the road. Perhaps a closer look into the way literacy is viewed in Québec and in how it is laid out in our English Language Arts curriculum might shed some light onto this highly problematic dilemma.

Literacy in Québec’s Curriculum

In 2003, more than 4 500 Quebecers aged 16 and over took part in the *International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)*. This joint study, carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada, aimed to measure the literacy levels of adults, i.e. the ability to understand and use printed and written information in everyday life, at home, at work and in the community. (MELS, 2007)

What the Québec literacy survey revealed was that “close to 45% of adult Quebecers aged 16 and over are at Level 3 or above in three areas (prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy). This is the level of competency required to function comfortably in contemporary society. In contrast, close to one adult in four is at level 1, which denotes very limited skills.” (MELS, 2007). This analysis made known as well “the need for maintaining and developing literacy skills throughout life to prevent their loss in later life. The results also show the importance of education in mastering these skills and the connection between literacy and income.” (MELS, 2007).

At this point, it is relevant and edifying to this thesis to explore the definitions of literacy as put forward by organizations and agencies that are relied upon and play a crucial role in supporting the acquisition and development of this necessary life skill here in this province. Literacy as defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reads:

“the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge

and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society.” (<http://www.literacy.ca>)

According to The Literacy Volunteers of Québec:

Literacy is more than knowing how to read and write.

A person who is literate can use reading, writing, speaking, and numerical skills effectively to understand and participate in the world around them.

Literacy is not a fixed skill. It needs to be exercised and challenged. Otherwise, the skill will not strengthen and may weaken.
(http://literacyvolunteersqc.ca/literacy_definition.php)

The Centre for Literacy espouses:

Literacy is a complex set of abilities needed to understand and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture – alphabets, numbers, visual icons – for personal and community development. The nature of these abilities, and the demand for them, vary from one context to another.

In a technological society, literacy extends beyond the functional skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening to include multiple literacies such as visual, media, and information literacy.

These new literacies focus on the capacity of individuals to use and make critical judgements about the information they encounter on a daily basis.

However a culture defines it, literacy touches every aspect of individual and community life. It is an essential foundation for learning through life, and must be valued as a human right.
(<http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/about/literacy>)

We, in Québec, are fortunate to have access to multiple organizations whose purpose is to support the learning of literacy to all those who are in need of improving their proficiency in

this vital skill. By reading each organizations definition of literacy, I am struck by the fact that their understanding and belief of what literacy means goes much deeper than what is often witnessed being taught in today's classrooms.

What teachers need to become aware of and enact in their classrooms is that in order for literacy to develop, students must become skilled at making connections between how texts are constructed and the purposes and functions they were designed to serve in our society. There is really nothing accidental about most texts and learning how texts are made and why they “look” and “act” the way they do is essential social knowledge. Without this knowledge, we are handicapped from developing the kind of literacy that allows individuals to fully participate in society. The elementary and the secondary Québec English Language Arts programs focus on a number of different text types, or genres for this reason. “This is essential knowledge in a literacy curriculum such as ours that aims to produce students who read many different types of texts critically and produce a range of texts for specific purposes” (MELS, 2008, p. 4).

The very first pages of our Québec Language Arts curriculum lay out unmistakably and succinctly the understanding that our ELA classrooms are to be developing and endorsing an environment that brings to life a literacy community based on Freire's ideology of emancipatory pedagogy sprung into action through critical literacy.

The new English Language Arts (ELA) program for the elementary schools of Québec is first and foremost a literacy program. The noted Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, described literacy as knowing how to “Read the world and the word.” This program is centred in the connection between the learner's world and words, since language is both a means of communicating feelings, ideas, values, beliefs and

knowledge, as well as a medium that makes active participation in democratic life and a pluralistic culture possible.

In order for our students to develop literacy in a world of rapid social, cultural and technological change, we need to take the time to connect learning about language to the worlds of the students we teach, including those children with special needs, so that they understand language-learning as the development of a repertoire of essential strategies, processes, skills and knowledge that will make it possible for them to learn throughout their lives. For this reason, the English Language Arts program for elementary school is grounded in the texts our students will encounter in the world and focuses on the development of fluent readers and writers of oral, written and visual discourse. The goal of any literacy program must be to provide opportunities for the learner to experience the power of language as a way of making sense of her/his experience and of breaking down the barriers that separate individuals. This program provides students with the opportunity to develop language competencies that respond to the realities of diverse situations; the interpersonal and communication strategies that they will require in order to become active, critical members of society; and an appreciation of their rich literary and cultural heritage. (MELS, 2001, p.72)

Teachers are presented further guidance of how to promote and advance this method of instruction by means of a rich description of a developmental profile through which students will proceed during their elementary school years.

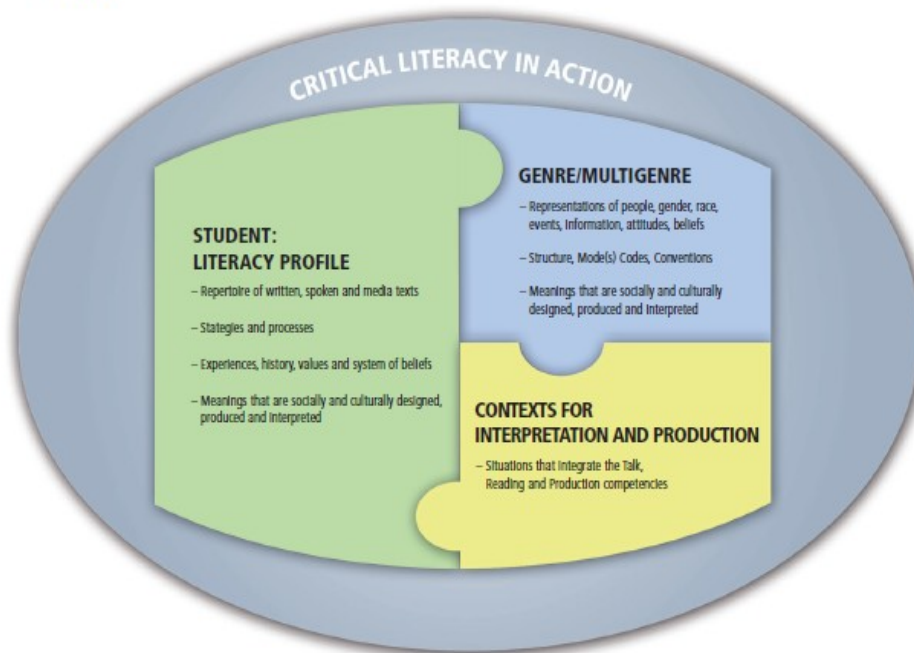
The student constructs her/his own reading identity by acquiring a repertoire of favourite texts and text types and of different strategies to interpret texts. The student develops not only an increasing control of a wide range of reading strategies, but also her/his awareness of how, when, and why s/he uses specific strategies to construct meaning from a text gradually evolves through trial-and error exploration, teacher-guidance and self-reflection. Since reading is a meaning-making process in which the reader responds to texts in the light of her/his personal, social and cultural background and experience, the student develops and explains her/his own preferences in reading material. The student becomes a more critical reader by responding to what is personally relevant to her/him and then gradually shifting her/his attention to the perspectives of others. Since no text has a single correct meaning that is

understood by everyone in the same way, the student learns first to develop her/his own responses to texts while recognizing that others will construct meaning differently. Throughout Cycles One, Two and Three, the student gradually learns to reassess and adjust her/his own responses to texts in the light of the views of others in small- and large-group discussions.

Another part of developing a more critical stance as a reader is the student's increasing understanding that the meaning of a text is shaped by the way it is written, specifically, by its structures and features. Thus, the student begins to see a text as a construction and to identify some of its social and cultural values, such as those in a novel like *Underground to Canada*. By the end of Cycle Three, the student begins to construct her/his own view of the world by comparing her/his own personal values and beliefs with those of a text. (MELS, 2001, p. 74)

The following image taken directly from the Québec English Language Arts program clearly illustrates the crucial role the teaching and learning of critical literacy plays in today's curriculum (MELS, 2008, p.5)

LITERACY



Abigail Anderson, the architect and main writer of both the elementary and secondary English Language Arts curriculum has spent years thinking, reading, writing and speaking about how to bring this type of curriculum into being. In her final years as the Curriculum Coordinator for English Language Arts at the Direction générale de la formation des jeunes of the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, she wrote passionately about how much our understanding of what literacy *is* and what literacy *is for* has changed. She states, "Today we understand that literacy is much more than a simple battery of decoding and encoding skills for working with print." Echoing the beliefs and literacy definitions of the Québec literacy organizations previously mentioned, she pushes our perception even further by reminding us,

To be functionally literate today, let alone critically literate, presupposes the development of reading and production skills in all three representational systems, as well as the capacity to use language to transact relationships in the world. To do this, the literate individual of the 21st century must be able to contend with texts that combine genres, media and modes. The literate individual of this century also requires the background and skills to recognize and evaluate the design(s) of meaning(s) in texts—which is less linguistic knowledge than it is social knowledge expressed through language—since to do otherwise risks becoming a passive consumer of other peoples' ideas, viewpoints, ideologies, values and beliefs. (Anderson, 2008, ¶. 4)

Anderson does not stop there. Never one to recognize what needs to be done and not offer practical suggestions of how to apply this in the classroom, she puts forward a number of progressive propositions that will push both the teacher and the student to delve more deeply into the world of critical literacy. Anderson strongly believes that the most powerful classroom resource is the teacher him/herself and what he/she can do to foster discussion and dialogue with the students. She writes, "In this pedagogical context, the teachers' own literacy is their

strongest resource, since it enables them to harness their own understanding about and experience with texts in the service of their students. It needs to be stressed that looking at texts in this fashion is an *interactive* process, in which the teacher monitors and guides discussions about different texts...” (Anderson, 2008, ¶. 5). It is not a haphazard discussion, but one that is planned and purposeful; a dialogue where students are guided to investigate the text and respond to messages relating to social concepts such as notions about time, power, gender and space, or boundaries that are imbedded within the texts and more importantly how they influence or affect us as we are reading them. These types of rich discussion and higher level thinking and questioning begin as early as Cycle 1 (grade 1 and 2) and continue throughout the student’s life in school.

In both elementary and secondary school, teaching literacy begins with a conversation about how a text is constructed and how these textual elements allow the text to achieve its function, using model texts as examples. Following this conversation, the teacher reviews what has been discovered about text and function before either introducing another text of the same type to be read or a production activity, in which students will be asked to draw on their understanding in order to produce another text of the same type. It should also be understood that, whether students are asked to read or to produce a text that they have been studying in this manner, the activity needs to take place in a learning context, or situation, that includes specific information about audience, purpose and any other information the learner requires. (Anderson, 2008, ¶. 5)

The critical conversation deconstruction process is only one part of the Québec ELA literacy curriculum as the activity of reproducing a variety of texts is crucial for students to truly become critically literate as they consolidate their learning and critical reasoning skills. “As importantly, the production of a text also takes students into the different representational

systems in a manner that allows them to experience directly how the system—in terms of its structures, features, codes and conventions—works” (Anderson, 2008, ¶. 6).

Perhaps even more imperative is the student’s ability to uncover and discern the *situatedness* of meaning—the fact that any meaning or message contained in a text is designed by the particular sociocultural and/or historical and/or ideological context in which it is produced.

What this implies on a very basic level is that there is a diversity of *competing meanings and messages* in the texts we encounter...We experience this diversity of meaning perhaps most pointedly when we are forced to come to grips with two apparently irreconcilable realities...This dimension of literacy pedagogy has less to do with resolving diverse meanings than it does with learning to recognize and anticipate the *situatedness* of all meanings and messages and taking this into account when we interpret their significance. It is this capacity that distinguishes critical thinking from all other kinds of thinking. (Anderson, 2008, ¶. 7)

Conclusion

In an era of “No Child Left Behind” standardized curriculum throughout the United States and a thrust for “back to the basics” in most of North America, we in Québec have been given the opportunity through the Québec Education Program (QEP) reform to teach a completely unstandardized curriculum. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Freireian based model of critical pedagogy underlying the English Language Arts literacy program that has been designed and implemented to promote the development of literacy as both an individual achievement and a social skill as well as “the development of a confident learner who finds in language, discourse and genre a means of coming to terms with ideas and experiences, and a

medium for communicating with others and learning across the curriculum” (MELS, 2008, p.6)

In the upcoming chapter we will take a more in depth look into what critical literacy is and how it might be played out in an elementary classroom as well as my own personal literacy

background as a child growing up and educated in the Québec education system of the 1970s.

Chapter 3 – Critical Literacy

What it is and what it looks like in the elementary classroom

We are what we say and do. The way we speak and are spoken to help shape us into the people we become. Through words and actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us.

Ira Shore, 2009

Having met when we were in high school, gone our separate ways for a time being, reconnecting in our mid twenties, and now heading into our eighteenth year of marriage, my husband and I have spent years discussing and debating our perspectives and understanding of every aspect of the field of education from which method of unit design is most effective to the covert predominance of white privilege that permeates the school system. So it is not unusual for my introduction to the concept of critical literacy to have surfaced from one of these frequent exchanging of ideas.

Lying around late one lazy Saturday morning, a conversation on the topic of memories of elementary school and favourite childhood storybooks was featured. Having attended elementary school at the same time and only a short 2 minute drive between our respective institutions, we both spoke fondly of a visiting storyteller who captured our imaginations with his lively rendition of Robert Service's poem "The Cremation of Sam McGee". As our recollections meandered along to discussing our love of Roald Dahl's classic "James and the Giant Peach", I threw out how much C.S. Lewis' "The Chronicles of Narnia" had me completely obsessed with the adventures of four British Children in this fanciful land. Christopher gave me a sideways look, sighed and tightened his mouth (which I knew signalled that a serious discussion was about to take place).

What followed was an eye-opening shattering of my favourite childhood past-time; a dawning realization that I fought against that morning and many mornings after until emotion was set aside and thoughtful contemplation of this alternative perspective was allowed to be considered.

Christopher took no time in recounting an episode he had shared with a former girlfriend. She, an artist, had been hired to design a store window display based on C.S. Lewis' "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe". She had been sitting reading the novel (my favourite of the series) when she had asked Christopher if he had ever read the book. Christopher replied that he hadn't but recalled it often lovingly described by many people as simply an endearing children's tale. She then began to read passages from the book; all of which contained blatant and unmistakable Islamophobic language and imagery that depicted a whole race of villainous characters "The Calormene" simply born evil. Christopher recalled criticism of the depiction of Fagan from Dickens' "Oliver Twist" denouncing the anti-Semitic overtones but was completely surprised that with such transparent and obvious demonization of people from the Middle East, that no one had ever spoken of it in these terms.

Looking back, I am embarrassed that it took so long for me to engage in a critical literacy discussion; and one that I did not initiate myself but was forced into kicking and screaming the whole way. It does make me wonder, that if not for my intimate relationship with this person from a background so distinctly different from my own, would I ever have contemplated the validity of an opposing "reading" of my cherished texts? Most probably not. I strongly believe that this form of personal connection is the catalyst to the majority of critical literacy awakenings in teachers coming from a powerbloc upbringing. It is not that we are evil people or bad teachers; it's just that being constantly surrounded and reaffirmed by a homogeneous majority

viewpoint does not promote the average person to question what has always been presented as the one way to see the world.

It is my hope that the upcoming chapter will shed light onto the importance and value of understanding what critical literacy is and the effect using such an empowering emancipatory curriculum method will have on the students in any elementary English Language Arts classroom. My own personal narratives of attempting to apply this literacy approach in my teaching will then be explored and analyzed in Chapter 5.

Critical Literacy Defined

For many, it is sometimes easier to understand what something *is not* before grappling with what it is. I have used this pedagogical approach in my classroom when teaching my students about how to phrase an ethical question or the use of acceptable email and internet etiquette. This method can therefore be applied to one's understanding of critical literacy. Comber (2001) assists us in our fluency by offering what reads as almost a heeding warning to professionals in the field

...it is not being negative and cynical about everything. It is not political correctness. It is not about censoring the bad books and only reading the good books. It is not indoctrination. It is not developmental. It is not about identifying racism, sexism, prejudice, and homophobia somewhere else or in texts that have little relevance for readers. It is not whole language with social justice themes. (pp 271-272)

Margaret Meek (1987) writes about the importance of not simply teaching children to decode the words but to actually engage in dialogue about what the text means to them. It is much more than the technical acquisition of reading skills. It is through this active process of thinking critically and taking part in rich discussion with others that a deep and powerful comprehension of the reading unfolds. She is referring to Paulo Freire when she writes,

He supports my belief that teaching a child or an adolescent to read is not a matter of direct instruction, telling them what to do when they confront a text. In that way the words and the world remain those of the instructor. But in the dialogue of teacher and student as they read and share texts which have significance for them both, the nature of reading and writing, the importance of both for both, becomes clear. (p. x)

What stands out as well in this selection is the need for the readings to “have significance”, not only in the eyes of the teacher but in those of the student as well. They are equal players here; joint partners in the game where no one has the upper hand and each learns from the other.

Giroux (1987) further emphasizes the necessity for the teacher to understand that in order for the students to gain knowledge from the curriculum playing out in today’s classroom, much more is needed than for the teacher to stand and impart what he/she believes to be true. Giroux continues by quoting David Lusted

Knowledge is not produced in the intentions of those who believe they hold it, whether in the pen or in the voice. It is produced in the process of interaction, between writer and reader at the moment of reading, and between teacher and learner at the moment of classroom engagement. (p. 18)

The power is in the promotion of deep and meaningful dialogue. It is when we allow ourselves and our students to question, to listen to one and other and to learn more about ourselves and the world in which we live. Ann Berthoff (1987) makes us reconsider our practice by stating,

Nothing in the field of literacy theory is more important than looking and looking again at the role of an awareness of awareness, of thinking about thinking, of interpreting our interpretations. (p. xv)

Giroux (1987) lays out for us the Freireian model of emancipatory literacy. A concise definition by which one can apply the foundation when developing an English Language Arts curriculum that will utilize critical literacy as the building block for student learning.

Central to Freire's approach to literacy is a dialectical relationship between human beings and the world, on the one hand, and language and transformative agency, on the other...literacy is not merely a technical skill to be acquired, but as a necessary foundation for cultural action for freedom...literacy is fundamental to aggressively constructing one's voice as part of a wider project of possibility and empowerment...To be able to name one's experience is part of what it means to "read" the world and to begin to understand the political nature of the limits and possibilities that make up the larger society. (p. 7)

Luke, (1997) describes critical literacy as a "commitment to reshape literacy education in the interests of marginalized groups of learners, who on the basis of gender, cultural and socioeconomic background have been excluded from access to the discourses and texts of dominant economics and cultures" (p.143). Critical literacy can be more simply defined as well

as “the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships” (Coffey, 2008). For the purposes of critical literacy, *text* is defined as a “vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society” (Robinson & Robinson, p.3). Therefore, in the elementary classroom setting, illustrated picture books, novels, conversations, songs, pictures, movies and the like are all considered texts. One must at all times remember that central to this is the notion of dialogue, or in Freire’s terms, “reading the word” and “reading the world” (Freire and Macedo, 1987).

The development of critical literacy skills enables people to interpret messages in the modern world through a critical lens and challenge the power relations within those messages. Teachers who facilitate the development of critical literacy encourage students to interrogate societal issues and institutions like family, poverty, education, equity, and equality in order to critique the structures that serve as norms as well as to demonstrate how these norms are not experienced by all members of society (Coffey, 2008).

Critical literacy is a way to use texts to help children to better understand themselves, others, and the world around them. Using children’s literature, teachers can help their class through difficult situations, enable individual students to transcend their own challenges, and teach students to consider all viewpoints, respect differences, and become more self-aware.

There are many activities that are already going on in our classrooms that build critical literacy. Reading novels written from the point of view of a child from another culture or set in another country; sharing stories about families and their religious traditions or considering the lives of young people like them who lived through war, persecution or poverty; as well, when we

ask our students to write from the point of view of someone else; all of these classroom experiences are ways of developing critical literacy. As Melissa Thibault (2004) reminds us, these activities all serve the same purpose: they help the student to see the world through someone else's eyes, to learn to understand other people's circumstances and perspectives and to empathize with them.

The Start of My Literacy Life

My own school memories of learning to read are very different from the pedagogy Freire espouses. At the tender young age of 4, I was, as Birmingham (1999) states "set off along the road to learn" at Saint Christina's in London, England.

The following poem illustrates much more than the surface level no-talking rule enforced by so many of our institutions of learning. On a much deeper level it speaks about how schools systematically go about training young children's enthusiasm, wonder and freedom right out of their little bodies. As so many classrooms are "teaching to the test" classrooms, opportunities for curiosity, creativity and exploration are rare. So many schools are places where learning to line up quietly is what is valued most. More and more what is valued are silent classrooms instead of students engaged in meaningful conversation; learning to take a test instead of discovering and asking questions. Heard and McDonough (2009) have us consider the seriousness of the issue as so "many elementary schools are valuing "straight lines" in both behavior and thought." It's important to note here that these are not ideals that only existed in the past, framed within movies, television shows or short stories but are frequently endorsed today with supervisors of

student teachers and young teachers who still value silence and acquiescence in order to demonstrate a mastery of teaching.

Straight Line
by Georgia Heard

*All the kindergarteners
walk to recess and back
in a perfectly straight line
no words between them.
They must stifle their small voices,
their laughter, they must
stop the little skip in their walk,
they must not dance or hop
or run or exclaim.
They must line up
at the water fountain
straight, and in perfect form,
like the brick wall behind them.
One of their own given the job
of informer – guard of quiet,
soldier of stillness.
If they talk
or make a sound
they will lose their stars.
Little soldiers marching to and from
pretend
their hair sweaty
from escaping dinosaurs
their hearts full of loving the world
and all they want to do
is shout it out
at the top of their lungs.
When they walk back to class
they must quietly
fold their pretends into pockets,
must dam the river of words,
ones they're just learning,
new words that hold the power
to light the skies, and if they don't
a star is taken away.
One star*

*by one star
until night grows dark and heavy
while they learn to think carefully
before skipping,
before making a wish.*

School was a serious place where you sat quietly at your table and practiced writing your letters of the alphabet and your numbers. There was no time to be silly or to be off task. Too much chatter would find you sitting in the corner the next day if your quota was not filled to the satisfaction of the teacher in charge. Occasionally you would be called to the Reading Room; a place where you would be rewarded with Smarties and Jelly Babies if you performed well. I can still remember the small hardcover books with the happy children on the cover on which the entirety of our reading program was based.

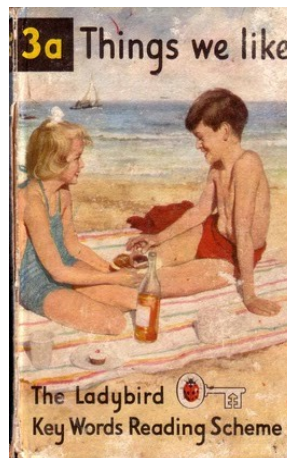


Image taken from http://ageofuncertainty.blogspot.com/2010_08_01_archive.html



Image taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_and_Jane

As well, I can still visualize the repetitive words that we would have to bark out as we went from page to page “*Here is Peter. Peter is here. Here is Jane. Jane is here. I like Peter. I like Jane.*” or “*This is Peter. This is Jane. This is Peter and Jane. Peter likes Jane. Jane likes Peter.*” This was our literacy program. This was my entry into the world of reading. I suppose I was reading the word but I was a far cry away from reading the world.

Thinking back to this time now, it is evident that this “Key Word” reading program, developed in the 1960s by British educationalist William Murray, presented much less difficulty for myself to connect with than it would have for my husband who is of mixed Iranian-European heritage (but is visually all Middle-Eastern) or my urban elementary school classes comprising of Portuguese and East Asian immigrant students. The social context of brother and sister Peter and Jane, their dog Pat, their Mummy and Daddy, and their home, toys, playground, the beach, shops, summering at grandma’s cottage by the lake, buses and trains reflected the life of a white, middle-class family; my family, as the children in these illustrations looked like me and they engaged in activities that were similar to the ones in which we partook regularly. And although

nothing about this form of literacy pushed me to think more critically, at the very least, it did not make me feel alien or apart from the little books I was reading.

I joyfully immersed myself into the world of literature. Mother Goose and A Child's Garden of Verses, were soon followed by Winnie the Pooh, Raggedy Ann and Andy, Noddy and Big Ears (who were those Golliwogs anyways?), The Brothers Grimm, Peter Pan and Wendy, The Blue Fairy Book, James and the Giant Peach, The Bobbsey Twins, Little House on the Prairie (evil Indians!!), Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys. Of course, there was always time for Paddington Bear, Pippi Longstocking, and Ramona as well as The Chronicles of Narnia (go get those Arabs with the curly shoes!!) and anything written by Judy Blume. Whether it be at school or under the covers of my bed flashlight in hand, I fell in love with what happened when words were strung together to tell a story. I was always filled with emotion as I turned from page to page following the adventures, cheering at the triumphs, and weeping at the losses the protagonists experienced in the black typeset captured by my quickly scanning eyes.

In re-examining my childhood reading repertoire, I am not surprised by what I see and more especially what I don't see. My selection of literature is comprised of classic tales that would easily find itself comfortably sitting on a Western Canon of English Literature list, a compendium of books written mainly by white North American and European authors that does not represent the viewpoints of many in contemporary societies around the world. Nothing in this collection made me stop to question who the main characters were, where they came from or how their life experiences were dissimilar from my own.

School was no different. The basal readers (anthologies combining previously published short stories, excerpts of longer narratives, and original works with individual identical books for

students, a Teacher's Edition of the book, and a collection of workbooks, assessments, and activities) and SRA cards (large boxes filled with color-coded cardboard sheets that included a reading exercise and multiple choice questions) were filled with stories chosen to illustrate and develop specific reading skills, which were taught in a strict pre-determined sequence. Classroom discussions never went beyond the script found in the teacher's book and questions were always based on determining our acquisition of that day's isolated skill. Literacy in the 1970s classroom in Québec was based on our ability to decode the print on the page so that we could comprehend the ideas and information that was being transmitted to us. The notion that we were to delve deeper into the underlying meanings and messages implied by the text, to question what was there and what wasn't and how this made us feel never found its way into my teachers' planners. I was without question, literate for that day and age but a long way from being critically literate by today's definition. What is, though, of greater concern are the classrooms that are still operating with this out dated "look and say" format or scripted one-size fits all reading lessons. Today's world is not the same as it was when I was growing up so why shouldn't today's classrooms make that leap forward into the 21st century as well.

A Place to Start in Today's Classroom

In order to properly prepare our students to be literate in this ever changing technological and multimodal world, we teachers need to reflect upon and challenge our own beliefs and understanding of literacy. Harwood (2008) advocates that "educators need to challenge children

and provide balanced literacy opportunities that value the social-cultural construction of knowledge while reflecting the diversity of children's lives." (§ 25). She strongly supports the notion that classroom "opportunities to collaborate, discuss, critique, deconstruct, and reconstruct a multitude of *meaningful* and *radical* texts (Kohl, 1995) are equally important in literacy development as learning to identify phonemes of sound." (§ 25).

For the sake of brevity, the definition of "radical texts" has been borrowed from Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, and Vasquez's (1999) suggestions for choosing critical texts. Radical texts chosen for elementary aged children should meet the following criteria:

- Texts don't make difference invisible, but rather explore what differences *make a difference*;
 - Texts enrich children's understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have been traditionally silenced or marginalized;
 - Texts show how people can begin to take action on important social issues;
 - Texts should explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people;
 - Texts should not provide "happily ever after" endings for complex social problems.
- (p. 70)

Children can be encouraged to think critically and answer critical questions that will enable them to examine their own insights as well as those presented in texts, which is at the heart of critical literacy programming. Teachers need to encourage children to challenge the status quo of what is represented within texts, asking questions such as:

- Whose voice is heard and whose voice is left out?"
- Who is the intended reader? (For example asking, is the text intended for specific groups of people and if so how is that group portrayed?)
- What was the world like when the text was created?
- What does the author want you to feel or think?
- What does the author expect you to know or value?
- What does the text say about boys (about girls)?

- Is it important that the main character is beautiful (powerful/wealthy)? (Harwood, 2008)

Luke, O'Brien, and Comber (2001, p. 116) suggest the following key questions:

- What is the topic? How is it being presented? What themes and discourses are being expressed?
- Who is writing to whom? Whose positions are being expressed? Whose voices and positions are not being expressed?
What is the text trying to do to you?
- What other ways are there of writing about the topic?
- What wasn't said about the topic? Why?

This list is not exhaustive, and the critical questions that arise will often depend on the children and the issue involve. There is no single 'recipe' of how to incorporate critical literacy within an elementary school curriculum so teachers need to work against the "commodification" (Luke & Freebody, 1999, p. 6) of critical literacy, as they begin to recognize the important benefits of fostering children's critical viewing of texts. Harwood (2008) does well to remind us that children's interests and questions should also be incorporated into the literacy curriculum and form an important addition to the critical questions that arise. By honouring children's own natural curiosity and using their inquisitiveness as a starting point, greater depth and engagement with texts is possible.

Conclusion

A question that my husband and I always put to our pre-service education students when discussing the concept of curriculum design is the "So what?" or "Why?" question. We push these soon to be teachers to consider deeply the impact that their choices of what they will bring

into their future classrooms will have on the children under their care. This is probably one of the most challenging exercises in lesson planning. Analyzing the overt and covert effect of one's chosen methodology and material on a widely diverse group of learners is incredibly time consuming and at times frustrating if all aspects are considered thoroughly.

Now, not one to ask of others something I would not do myself, I end this chapter with the questions "Why teach critical literacy? What difference will it really make in the lives of elementary students and teachers?" In all honesty, I believe the difference of enacting a program of critical literacy into one's English Language Arts curriculum as compared to my own literacy learning as a student, student teacher and teacher is profound. As opposed to a basal textbook, scripted or worksheet driven reading program, a true emancipatory literacy curriculum which, in the words of Lankshear and Lawler (1987) is a literacy curriculum that enables students to become properly literate, a literacy of hope and possibility, of affirmation and acceptance; a literacy that challenges us to look beyond our limited cultural assumptions and worldviews; a literacy that not only legitimates students' voices but allows them to see that they are part of the continuing human dialogue, and that their lives can make a difference is what needs to be put in place. Without a doubt, it will take a great many more hours to develop and there will be numerous mishaps along the way but the empowerment and sense of self that will be fostered in that community of learners is well worth it.

The proceeding chapter will now venture into the realm of methodology. A variety of methods ranging from personal narrative, auto-ethnography to critical incidents will be defined and ultimately combined into that a mixed-methodological approach, which will be defended as to why this is the perfect choice when reflecting on one's own personal history and experience with critical literacy in the classroom.

Chapter 4 – We are the Stories We Tell

A mixed-methodology approach

“But enough about you, let me tell you about me...” (Apple, 1996, P. xiv.)

Michael Apple wisely notes that the qualitative methodology of personal narrative was initially designed to develop a vehicle of expression to those minorities and disempowered who are otherwise voiceless. In the time since the first qualitative efforts to examine aspects of the life of the oppressed and disenfranchised were introduced, Apple argues that it has become the voice of the privileged that has more often or not utilized this methodology. Stonebanks (2008) furthers this perspective by stating that within the “western context”, when the superficially non-powerbloc (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997) voices are heard in a public forum, it is usually via politically motivated powers that allow such authors because they “fit” within their agendas. How disheartening. How heartbreaking to think that my own voice, that of a member of the powerbloc, that, if not careful, my own writing could be seen, not as a contribution whatsoever, but as yet another piece of heroic musings of a white, upper-middle class, woman (and as a woman, economics aside, hardly oppressed within the comforts of elementary school) who came in to an urban/inner-city classroom and saved the day. A voice heard, and repeated over and over again, in books, television, movies and in staffrooms everywhere.

“Also, I have to use tough love to make this Latin-American teenager believe in himself!”
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbhrz1-4hN4>)

The above quote is a scene from a comedy piece created in 2010, and internet video that went viral, titled “Trailer For Every Oscar-Winning Movie Ever” (interestingly, housed/categorized within youtube’s ‘Sociological Images’ section), that mocks the prescribed elements required for a movie to become a critically acclaimed Hollywood blockbuster. As many scenes flash across the screen, including mocking homage to such films as “Rain Man” (1988) and “Goodwill Hunting” (1997), a scene of the White leading man sitting on a teacher’s desk pleading the above line, while a Latino teenager sits at his desk looking angrily off into the distance. What hope this “video gone viral” does provide me, is an assurance that we are developing a sense of media literacy to the archetypes of teachers and teaching. Clearly, this shattering of the teacher stereotype of “saving those that need to be saved” is surfacing, but whether it is being revealed by those solely outside of the trenches of teaching as opposed to those within the field itself is not clear. What is clear, is that for the narrative based methodology to have any worth, especially when it relates to those of us from powerblocs, honesty and transparency of self, however difficult to admit, is essential.

“Value-free research is impossible”

(Denzin, 1989, P. 23)

The admission that research, the pursuit of knowledge itself is counter-intuitive, even frightening, to those of us that came from a “nature” perspective when confronted with the bachelor studies’ philosophical question of “Are teachers made or born? Is it a calling, or a learnt profession?” We are comforted by the idea that knowing is a truth that is absolute and that we are born to be teachers and transfer this set knowledge, developed and established by those wiser and

smarter than us, to our students. It makes the banking of knowledge (Freire, c1993) easier to validate and even a fake constructivism easier to employ when you make sure the cumulative outcome is standardized. The opposite is frightening. Frightening because it means that we, as members of the powerbloc need to acknowledge our own subjectivity and acknowledge the subjectivity of those around us as equally valid for consideration. However, if utilized with honesty, this fear in acknowledging subjectivity can be turned into the potential for change when we reveal aspects of the privileged for purposes of scrutiny. From the archetypes of teaching, to the development of such stereotypes via narratives, we can change perceptions through honest revelation of who we really are. And we can do this through qualitative based stories.

The principles of Denzin and Eisner (1990) and the idea that acknowledging one's values and subjectivity within one's research allowed greater understanding to the reader can be liberating as opposed to stifling. It can lead to true transformative change if we, the powerbloc, realize that we are a part of the story and not the story itself. We are characters in the research method in need of evaluation and not the purveyors of the reality of the classrooms of which we write about. The idea that all researchers, whether they come from a powerbloc or not, bring their preconceived notions, prior knowledge, culture and/or theoretical leanings on the subject to be studied with them is now accepted in the academic world. That researchers are acknowledging this by revealing their background to their readers so that the textual experience will be that much richer and allows a sometimes humbling view into a world that is so often not revealed (Stonebanks, 2006). For the readers of this text, my hope is that they analyze the stories in chapter five with the recognition that I am the main participant to be examined. I am the true subject and those around me, mentioned in the text, are constructions of my reality. With this in mind, this is a revelation of the struggles and potential victories of a single member of the

teaching profession who, as statistics would assure, is a member of the powerbloc. The qualitative methodological format of the three stories in chapter five will venture into the realm of a mixed-methodology milieu, in which personal narratives are the primary method which gesture towards the thick description aspects of autoethnography to bring vivid life to words on paper. Three critical incidents are the impetus for the stories, and each will be followed by a critical analysis further reflecting on the moment captured in text.

In this chapter I will define the methods being utilized, but must first begin with a disclosure of myself as the author and as a teacher.

Subjectivity

To articulate experience, to give language to otherwise inchoate perception, is always empowering and liberating.

Wendy Martin, 1990

As someone who has been part of the education community for the past 20 years either in the role of elementary teacher, university sessional lecturer or consultant, I am frequently queried on the type of teacher I am when working with my students. What is essentially being questioned is the methodology on which I base my belief system as to how children learn best. The answer is always the same. It has always been the same and I am confident will remain the same until the end of my days. I proudly state that I am an eclectic teacher. One who does not live and die by one method or technique but one who analyzes the context, content and learner at

that particular moment in time and then reaches into a teacher toolbox in order to select the most useful strategy for that unique situation. It is not a random haphazard “reach and grab” but a thoughtful process of determining what the best fit will be for all those involved.

It is with this same thoughtful deliberation, that I have opted in favour of a mixed-methodology approach, with its strength of depth and flexibility to support the research being carried out to develop potential directions for concrete emancipatory change, as opposed to simply an effort to hone the tool of a single methodology, often overlooking the struggles of those being “studied” (Tuhaiwai-Smith, 1999).

Critical Incidents

There is a growing emphasis on integrating critical incidents into the field of teacher education and qualitative research studies. (Halquist & Musanti, 2010)

Within the field of Education, critical incidents are often used within (but certainly not limited to) sociology based classes as means to understand theory within the “real world” of schools. In this case, it is a form of praxis, challenging students of education (from undergrad to masters) to either acknowledge or discount evidence that a wide range of education based social theories can be either validated through firsthand experience, or perhaps even discarded (with enough proof).

Critical incidents are not ‘things’ that exist independently of an observer and are awaiting discovery like gold nuggets or desert islands, but like all data, critical incidents are created. Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation. (Tripp, 1993, P. 8)

A critical incident could involve a broad range of issues, from racism, ableism, gender discrimination, media, social groupings, bullying, multiculturalism and so on. It does not have to be a negative experience, but it has to have meaning to the observer. Sikes, Measor, and Woods (1985) acknowledge that critical incidents are “highly charged moments and episodes that have enormous consequences for personal change and development” (P. 432). Within Stonebanks’ (2007) *James Bay Cree and Higher Education*, he uses a series of critical incidents to weave the experience of living and working within a Cree reservations in, what is often described as, the isolated northern regions of Canada. He uses critical incidents as a means to focus his personal narrative through a participant observation lens, allowing him to discern what data was worthy of investigation and what should be discarded.

Personal Narrative Inquiry

"... humans are storytelling organisms who ... lead storied lives." (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990)

The use of personal narratives in educational research has been endorsed by many in the field (Pokinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 1980,1995, 2000; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). Telling our own stories, sharing them with our colleagues, and listening to

theirs, provides a fresh awareness of one's teaching experiences. It creates an enriched context within which to reflect on what it means to be a teacher.

At heart, narrative requires simply the recounting of an event or sequence of events. Yet as experienced by both teller and audience, narratives have special characteristics that enrich and deepen experiences in both learning and in self-assessment. Narrative is uniquely built upon the particular. It is personal and serves as a powerful mode by which human beings both discover meaning in, as well as meaningfully shape, their experience. Narrative is the medium through which we come to know, through which meanings are made (Bruner 1986; Polkinghorne 1988). Jerome Bruner (1999), one of the creators of narrative psychology, states that telling stories is not just something we do, but rather it is the "very process in which we construct Self ... No story, no self" (p. 8). Central to narrative is the idea that it organizes human meaning. We construct knowledge and meaning by constructing language schemes. These language schemes are organized as narratives. As Polkinghorne (1988) points out, the core argument for the value of narrative is that narratives are "the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful" (p. 11). Narrative centers on change, development, growth. Narrative represents, revives and makes present the past, in ways that shape future experience (Kramp & Humphreys, 1993).

Human beings are natural storytellers. We conceive our lives as a web of stories and we use stories to construct meaning and to share communicate ourselves with others. Everyone has a story to tell. Stories are often mixtures of pain, suffering, and frustration on one hand, and joy, pride, and satisfaction on the other hand (Rosen, 1996). As people share their stories, they shape the meanings of their unique experiences. (Butcher, 2004)

The process of telling one's story is both an informative and transformational act for both the storyteller and the listener (Butcher & Buckwalter, 2002). The phrase "to tell a story" can mislead, for the telling is not simply a reporting of something that already exists. Each telling creates something new. In the act of telling, we make or shape stories, and in telling our own stories we shape and reshape ourselves (Booth 1988; Alter 1989; Coles 1989; Witherell and Noddings 1991). As people share their stories with others, they name and shape the meanings of their unique experiences. Since stories are never told in exactly the same way, stories and storytelling permit both continuity and change (Harvey, 1996). (Butcher, 2004, ¶ 3)

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a blurred genre . . . a response to the call . . . it is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections between life and art . . . making a text present . . . refusing categorization . . . believing that words matter and writing toward the moment when the point of creating autoethnographic texts is to change the world. (Jones, 2005)

Reed-Danahay (1997) describes an autoethnography as an investigation of self within a social context. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) explain that this approach provides the opportunity for researchers to intertwine their personal experiences with the professional aspects. For Connelly and Clandinin (1990), "story is both the phenomenon and the method". It is a holistic process integrating the process and product. Chang (2008) builds on the holistic benefits of autoethnographic work in emancipatory and transformative pedagogy:

The "forces" that shape people's sense of self include nationality, religion, gender, education, ethnicity socioeconomic class, and geography. Understanding "the forces" also helps them examine their preconceptions and feelings about others, whether they are "others of similarity", "others of difference," or even "other of opposition". (p. 52)

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as “auto biographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with culture descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation”.

Autoethnography partakes of certain features of storytelling, it being analogous to other genres of self-narrative but it stands out by virtue of transcending mere narration of the self to the extent that it engages in cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008).

My primary interest in autoethnography is not only the tradition of rich, thick description (Geertz, 1973) that brings a vividness of the experience to life for the reader, but as Denzin embraces, the political act that brings context and *change* to the context through the story being forwarded .

My position can be briefly summarized. Ethnography is a not an innocent practice. Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political, by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other. (Denzin, 2006, P. 333)

Denzin’s highly influential utilization of autoethnography allows what has been often misrepresented or forgotten in one’s own history to be re-examined through a critical lens. He notes, “(i)n bringing the past into the autobiographical present, I insert myself into the past and create the conditions for rewriting and hence re-experiencing it” (p. 334).

Conclusion

For the most part, upon sharing some of my past classroom stories with university pre-service teachers they come away with the belief that I was quite a radical teacher for my time. In reality, reflecting on my years in the elementary classroom, I can easily say that I was indeed a teacher who cared deeply for her students and her profession and was genuinely passionate about trying to share a love for literature with them but to consider myself to have been a teacher that put herself at risk against the system for the betterment of my students is a far cry from the truth.

In my mind, I definitely took steps to encourage my students to become equal members of our classroom learning community. Their ideas and expertise were valued and their thoughts, questions and perspectives took centre stage throughout our daily discussions. I truly believe that I understood and enacted Chege's (2009) assertion in that:

adopting dialogic pedagogies entails faith and trust on both sides (the teacher and the students). Students must see authenticity on the part of the teacher to be able to take the risks that critical pedagogy most times calls for. It would be irresponsible to ask students to share their experiences and reflections, to make students vulnerable, if the teacher is not willing to do the same. "Empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (hooks, 1994, p. 21).

I shared with my students openly and they in turn shared with me and each other. Our classroom was a safety zone in what was often an oppressive system, where the fear of being untenured and working for wages that would only keep you nourished and housed pay check to pay check was always in the back of your mind. Throw into the mix a couple of children of your own and silence and acquiesce become all too familiar bed mates. Most of us don't really realize how conservative we were or had to be until time is taken to reflect on these snapshots from the past.

The following chapter will lay out three separate yet interwoven critical incidents from my first few years teaching in an urban/inner-city elementary school setting. Each narrative will tell the story of my struggles to bring critical literacy into my English Language Arts classroom. Reflection and critical analysis of each episode will be offered in order to shed a deeper understanding of what occurred and why, not to mention my perspective on the possible impact my teaching had on my students and myself.

Chapter 5 – Reflections from the Field

A critical conversation in context

The unexamined life isn't worth living.

Socrates, 450 BC (approx)

Hopefully this chapter, done through a reflective narrative account of my own teaching experience, will contribute to the current day understanding of the role of critical literacy in the classroom or the lack there of. It will lay bare my attempts, fraught with many mistakes and omissions, to bring into the classroom a critical pedagogy lived out through the day to day circumstances of a teacher and her students struggling with the turmoil and perplexity of a newly implemented curriculum. Due to countless discussions with my husband, I was well aware of the underpinnings of what critical pedagogy was and what it was supposed to look like in a classroom setting. But like so many others in the teaching profession, it was one thing to know what it was but to have the courage to enact it was a whole other matter. The following will provide the reader with detailed descriptions of how we, students and teacher, worked towards, albeit all too often in an unsuccessful manner on my part, to implement a problem-posing approach, the incorporation of cultural capital, the use of dialogue and conscientization in the classroom, and the idea of empowerment and cultural politics (Darder, 2008) in an urban/inner-city elementary school.

The Context

In order to be able to visualize the upcoming narratives more accurately, it is important that a setting of time and place in history be offered for the reader. All three stories unfold at one point or another in the decade spanning from 1993-2003 at one of the four public urban/inner-city schools where I worked in Montreal, Québec. During that time, as schools and school boards shifted from an organizational alliance of a confessional to linguistic nature, so too did my association transfer from a Catholic school board to an Anglophone one. It is noteworthy to mention, that although I am indeed an Anglophone, my religious background was not Catholic and the only way that I gained entry into this board (who at the time required a letter of attestation from your local parish priest) was due to my affiliation with the English Language Arts board consultant at the time who was able to get me placed into a classroom that no one else wanted (I was the sixth teacher assigned to this class and it was only September 23rd, barely three weeks into the current school year).

Resources were limited and so hours at lunch time and after school were spent in dusty book rooms, searching for possible gems amidst the piles of discarded texts and papers. A community of sharing was not a valued practice with staff members. The underlying notion was if you got hold of something that worked well in your classroom, you kept it under lock and key, so that no one could “steal” your sure-fire way of keeping the students occupied for a lesson or two. Considering that most classrooms around me enjoyed daily phonics and grammar drills as well 1960s spelling lists and reading comprehension overheads used and reused year after year, I was perfectly fine with their lending habits.

All my former schools were comprised mainly of children whose parents were considered to be recent immigrants to Canada and due to their economic situation most were situated below the poverty line. In my cycle three classrooms (grades 5 and 6), at least one-third of my class (size averaging around 30 students) had been evaluated and labelled with learning differences, the other third were considered “at-risk” of dropping out of the system before completing high school and on a waiting list for testing, leaving the final third residing at various points along the learner spectrum.

I was fortunate to have always had the support of my administrators in one form or another. They either left me completely alone, content to have a warm body in the classroom, or would find ways to enhance my interest in advancing my personal learning, through workshops and specialized training, or that of my students, by allowing me to organize various extra-curricular excursions to Museums, cultural exchanges with Native communities or celebratory classroom and/or school-wide events. All were more than pleased with what was produced in my classroom and even if they weren’t always sure why my desks were arranged the way they were or why we were so noisy (and we were noisy) or why we spent so much time outside of the “walls” of our classroom, they were always there to support me in good times and bad and for this I am eternally grateful.

My relationship with my colleagues was at times challenging. I have been fortunate to have worked alongside many wonderful people in the education system who have taught me a great deal about the art of teaching and about myself as well (this is in reference to my final school to which I was so privileged to have been placed). But there have been years when I have been shunned by whole teaching staffs and my simply entering into the lounge to collect my lunch would end all conversations until I had left. I have endured “colleagues” who have openly

stated that I didn't teach my students, that I bribed them and let them get away with too much freedom and others who were convinced that student published writing had not come from the students but were scribed from my own hand; "colleagues" who have told my students, that what I am teaching them is inappropriate and that they should be ashamed, always paired with the warning of, "Don't repeat this to Mrs. Stonebanks."; which of course, they always did.

It was not always easy but for certain it was always worth it. I would not trade in my years teaching in these schools for anything. It is due to my time engaged with my young students that have brought me farther along in my understanding of what it truly means to be a teacher. It is a journey that is only still just beginning. As I write, reflect and reflect some more on the narratives you are about to read, I along with you gain a deeper and more profound understanding of the awesome effect critical pedagogy and critical literacy can have on those that become woven into its fabric. I add my piece to the quilt and encourage those that read along with me, to add their stories and pieces as well.

Incident 1 – Catholics Only

Tuesday was the day Sister Jane visited the school. Tuesday was the day I was relieved of my teaching responsibilities for an hour and Tuesday was the day where if you weren't Catholic then you weren't allowed to participate, of course unless you were willing to convert.

It was an odd weekly series of events to witness. The nun would enter the classroom and she would begin her prepared talk on some tenet from the Catholic faith. Usually what followed

was practice for an upcoming presentation in the form of a skit that would be showcased at that month's school-wide assembly. She would bring the students into the open area adjacent to my classroom and there she would begin assigning roles to each of the students. "Kathy, you will play Mary. Ryan, you will play Jesus. Brian, you will play the leper..." and on it would go until all the children had a part in the little play.

I remember sitting in my classroom half-listening to her provide background information about each of the characters and lines that would have to be memorized for the following week. When all of a sudden I heard her voice sharpen. "Dushan, stand back! Get to the wall with the others! I don't want you disturbing us again!" I sat up confused. Dushan was a well behaved quiet student who rarely, if ever had displayed any problematic behaviour in class. Curious, I had to investigate. As I peeked around the corner of the tall filing cabinets that housed my art supplies the image that met my eyes shocked me to the very core. In the center of the room, smiling and hard at work on their skit were all my students with Catholic backgrounds and standing in a row, their backs against the wall, fidgeting yet at the same time attempting to keep themselves out of the line of fire of the nun were my students who were not Catholic; dark faces on the outside, allowed to look on silently but not participate; not to be seen and definitely not heard. If you were not of the Catholic faith, you were not permitted to be part of Sister Catherine's curriculum. Of course, if you wanted to convert to Catholicism then she would be more than happy to assist you in your journey and that would give you access to take part in her weekly scheduled lessons.

Caught between not wanting my "banished" students to have to endure this overt discrimination and not being strong enough to speak out against these clearly prejudicial actions to the school board, my administrator or the church, I began a subversive tactic that would allow

me to keep under the radar yet provide some sanctuary for these children. I set in motion a “Moral Education” class on those Tuesday afternoons. It was simply a place for the non-Catholic students to come together and do activities while the nun was busy doing God’s work. I’m not sure if it made a difference in the lives of the children who I had taken away from their spots along the wall but this quiet act of micro resistance allowed me to feel that maybe it had.

Reflections on Catholics Only

Putting into words for the first time the above narrative, leaves me feeling quite ill. There is nothing about what has been shared that would leave the reader with a notion of my having enacted any sort of critical literacy or emancipatory space. Instead what comes across is someone who didn’t really want to get involved in confronting the reality of the hegemonic system in which she was a part and instead took the easy way out; basically putting a bandage on an amputation. Even in the security of my “Moral Education” class, did we discuss why they were now working with me? Did we read literature that would lend itself to discussions of unjust systems and discriminatory treatment of people? Did I do anything that would let these children believe that they had a voice or provide for them avenues of empowerment? No, I did not. I hid them and myself away from the actuality of what was occurring around us. I guess in a way that was the role I chose to play in the main feature Sister Jane was showcasing in our school that year. The role of protector; a role not that far off from the Lady Bountiful character I had donned many times before.

To Sister Jane's credit, she was simply enacting the existing laws, she was doing everything within her right and religious/ideological obligations. In fact, when the laws changed she attempted for a year or two to teach the "ethics and religious culture" class and was often bewildered and bemused about what it meant to take religion out of ethics or teach about religions other than her own in an equitable manner. Because of this, because it didn't match with her beliefs or values, she took early retirement. At the very least, she made a larger stand than I did. There were avenues at my disposal to protest. Conferences to present at, articles to write, union meetings to attend and such but fear overwhelmed all of these possibilities for transformative change.

Incident 2 – Dear Prime Minister

March 2003 marked the beginning of Gulf War 2. We sat at home around the television and I wept. As I watched the "Shock and Awe" of a city bombed and blasted into obliteration, I cried for the children, for the injustice, and I have to admit for the powerbloc to which I was a member of for life. We were living in a world gone mad where a life didn't equal a life; where the slaughter of innocent people was brushed off as unfortunate but necessary in order to take control of a country and the oil fields that permeated its land. Where family members expressed that it all wasn't too bad as American technology would improve oil extract efficiency.

I wondered how I would deal with this tomorrow in class. How could I ever be as strong as someone like Jane Elliot, who in the aftermath of the Martin Luther King assassination, had taught her class what it felt like to be discriminated against simply due to something as out of

your control as the colour of your eyes or skin. Her controversial risk taking, and I believe an example of true critical pedagogy in action, “*blue-eyed/brown-eyed exercise*” was now a staple lesson in university education classes but at the time in the 1960s, her progressive and unconventional teaching brought her negative reactions from co-workers, community members and people across the United States.

I have heard time and again people say that if they had been there, they would have stood beside Ghandi, Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks. I say “No way!” It is much easier to ease one’s conscious and say in hindsight that you would have been there but in reality, it takes a very special person who can stand up to the pressures of a system so much larger than you and one that is pushing so ardently and relentlessly against you (Stonebanks, 2004). Needless to say, I was not this type of person and was at a loss to know what I would do the next day in class with my students. So I took the easy way out and waited to see what would happen.

The following morning, the classroom was a buzz. It was clear that most had spent a great deal of time watching the same images and news reports that I had in my home. As they entered the classroom and found their seats, I sat back and simply let them talk. They shared conversations that had most likely begun in their homes and their variations of what their parents thought and felt about the invasion. I continued to wait, to give them space, part of me knew that they needed time to unload all that they had inside them, the other part of me waited because I still didn’t know what I would do next.

And then it happened, one of my students put up her hand and called out to me “Mrs. Stonebanks, I’m afraid. What if they come and bomb my house? What do I do?” It wasn’t a question that I was expecting but it made sense that children would be worried about the same

horror potentially affecting them especially considering that the vast majority did not come from powerbloc backgrounds and have probably heard more nuanced and factual comprehensions of Western foreign policy. So as the class quieted down, we took it from there. In the safety of the classroom family, open and honest discussions could be held about what we were thinking, feeling, fearing, what we understood and what we didn't. I was careful not to promote my own personal agenda or forward my beliefs of what the invasion was based on but what I did was allow them a space to deliberate and offer multiple perspectives to broaden their understanding of each other and the crazy world they were living in.

Part way through the conversation, one of the students asked which countries made up the invading forces, "The coalition of the willing". When asked whether Canada was going to join in on the invasion, I told them that we were not. That our Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, had been reported saying, "that forcing a regime change is not desirable. Many leaders in the world are not his friends, but, he adds, only the local people have the right to change government. "If we change every government we don't like in the world where do we start? Who is next?" (CBC, 2003, P. 4)

The students decided that they would like to express what they were feeling about the invasion and Canada's role. Many of them were still fearful that Canada and they themselves would be implicated and hurt in some way or another. Then an idea came to me. One that would give them a voice, a sense of security and a feeling that there was an audience who would be willing to listen to what they were thinking and dealing with at this moment in history. And one that stood in sharp contrast to the direction that my colleagues were taking in having their students write letters of support to soldiers already serving in Afghanistan. They would write a

letter to the Prime Minister, the right honourable Jean Chrétien. I put forward my quick thinking idea and they loved it.

Constructivism? Probably not. But I am reminiscent of the fact that Joe Kincheloe would often repeat to teachers in graduate classes when they felt overwhelmed by an anti banking model of teaching that being a critical pedagogue didn't mean that you stopped being a teacher; that you stopped forwarding ideas. It seemed to fit exactly what was needed at the time. And by week's end, twenty-eight letters, including one of my own explaining the impetus for the writing campaign, were mailed away to Ottawa.

Reflections on Dear Prime Minister

In no way do I feel that this incident is to be viewed as revolutionary, ground breaking or even an act of passive resistance. There was no risk involved in a Canadian class writing letters to a government who was opposed to the invasion of Iraq. I skimmed all the pieces of writing quickly before sealing them in the large brown envelope. They had been peer edited for fluency, clarity and basic grammar and spelling but the content of each letter was left up to the person who had penned it. They were free to express whatever an eleven or twelve year old wanted to share. Out of the twenty-eight letters that my class sent, twenty-seven of them were in support of Canada's position of not joining the invasion in Iraq.

Had I been teaching in the United States at the time, would I have taken the risk to let my students write these types of letters to the President, free from my interference of what position

to take on the matter or even still, did I have them send copies of their opinions to the United States government? No, I would not and no, I did not. Again, bound and gagged by fear of a system that seemed to call all the shots in one's economic and career advancement, I spent most of the time keeping under the radar. I was not brave. I was not a radical leader. But when a large package from the Prime Minister's office arrived for my class which included a letter of response to our campaign, thanking us for our words and thoughts and with it was a signed photograph of Jean Chrétien, the excitement and smiles on the faces of my students assured me that it was alright. I hadn't started a revolution but I had given these children a forum for others to hear their voice and people had indeed listened.

Critical Incident 3 – Rainbow of Dreams

Okay, I'll admit it...I'm nose-y by nature, so when the high school publication *Rainbow of Dreams* crossed by my desk I was instantly hypnotized. Leafing through the pages, I'll never forget the countless faces reaching out and drawing me in. There was something about these silent images that beckoned me to read their stories. I had to find out where they had come from and why their pictures had been captured at that particular time in their lives. I read and I read and I thought to myself that this would be a perfect literacy project for my class to undertake.

It took a few years after having discovered the ground breaking high school work (two further publications had come out in the mean time) before I was ready to tackle this type of inquiry assignment with my students. My class's heritages spanned from various cultural backgrounds that touched all parts of the globe. My motivation was not only for my

multicultural students to learn from and about each other in order to build understanding and acceptance but to empower them through the discussions and writing they would produce and share with each other and the community.

Days and weeks that turned into months were spent together pouring over family photographs, asking each other questions about where we came from, why we had left our native homeland, what we had brought with us on and continued to practice in our new country and what we had to leave behind. Questions that couldn't be answered at the moment, were sent home, discussed with parents and grand-parents and then brought back to move the conversation forward. The students knew they were in a safe environment where no one would openly pass judgement, mock or demean them. Together, we could take risks, we could ask questions, we could share stories, we could laugh and we could cry.

I think one of the most powerful moments during this project came when a student teacher who was in doing a final field experience with me, decided that he would like to investigate his past as well. He worked simultaneously with my students in order to follow the process as authentically as possible. The day came when it was his turn to share with the class the first draft of his "constructed memoir" (the major writing piece for this inquiry was for each student to take a family photograph that *spoke to them*, interview family members to uncover the story behind the photograph, then take the information from the interview and craft it into a memoir from the perspective of one of the people in the photograph...this involved many, many hours of instruction of reading photographs, asking questions, interview techniques, reading and writing the memoir genre, writer's craft, oral speaking, peer editing, and much more).

As he stood in front of his young audience, he read to them a story of leaving home and family behind, a story that obviously reached deeply into whom he was and where his roots held

fast. I say obviously as part way through the retelling, his voice wavered and cracked, tears welled up in his eyes as he struggled to continue his reading. My students were transfixed. Their bodies in complete stillness as they sat in their seats listening to him try to get his story out. He needed to share this narrative with them and they knew this. Quietly and without disruption, a couple of my twelve year old students turned and questioned me with their eyes of what they should do. I nodded to them and gestured that all was alright and that we should let him continue. As he concluded his sorrowful and moving tale, the class burst into a round of supportive applause. He had put himself out. He had taken a risk. He had shared with them a piece of himself and they understood this. It was a transformative moment in my classroom for each and every one of us.

Reflection of Rainbow of Dreams

I am always hesitant to share anecdotes of successful teaching and learning moments in my history for fear of coming across as some “super teacher” in the likes of Ms. Frizzle of Magic School bus fame (who is my idol by the way...what better mantra than “Take chances, make mistakes and get messy!”). The above narrative was one positive incident where there was harmony between a desired critical literacy outcome and the reality of what actually transpired in the classroom. Occasions like that one are often few and far between with missed opportunities and inconsiderate unconscious and/or dysconscious reactions being the rule rather than the exception.

One of those reactions took place while the students were in the midst of searching for their family snapshots. Most of the pictures that were handed in showcased wedding

photographs, images of families partaking in celebrations, outdoor gardens and homes long gone as well as individuals who had since past away but held a place of honour in the history of the family and the country of origin. As I was sifting through the pile of pictures, noting who had brought what in, my student teacher approached my desk with a look of concern on his face. He placed the photograph in front of me and I remember being quite taken aback by the image of the young smiling man standing behind the large anti-aircraft gun, hands in ready position. There was no way that I was going to be able to use this photograph. It was violent and who knew how many people had been killed before or after this picture had been taken.

That night at supper, I spoke with my husband about the photograph and asked his advice as to how I should approach the student in order to discuss the inappropriateness of his choice. What followed was another lesson in how I had missed a critical literacy possibility and was running the risk of closing the door to learning for one of my students. What I have not yet divulged to the reader is that the country of origin of the armed soldier was Iran and what I was dealing with was the bias I had to these types of images in relation to the country in which they were taken. After all, Christopher (whose father was of mixed English-Italian decent and served in three wars himself) asked me how I would have reacted if a child had brought in a shot of a grandparent who fought for the Canadian, British or American army in WW1 or WW2 or Korea, or Vietnam or etc., etc. I had to be honest and say that because I had grown up seeing these types of photographs depicting “our heroes”, I wouldn’t have batted an eye.

In case you are wondering, the student used the photograph in his project and it turned out that his father was not a soldier but information’s officer who had stood there behind the gun and simply asked his buddy to take the picture for a lark. Another bit of information I would

never have learned if I had allowed my background and bias make the final decision. The next step though is to ask myself why does that make a difference and make me feel better.

Conclusion

By looking back and by remembering the past, I have attempted to bind my past experiences as a professional educator in several contexts and roles to create patterns of my professional development in the stream of my consciousness (Green, 1991).

Writing about politicized knowledge, Stonebanks (2008) has offered up King's (1991) description of dysconsciousness which is a state of mind that occurs when there is exclusion and disconnect of the Other's pain. In King's analysis of discrimination associated with dysconscious attitudes to teaching, she states "(d)ysconsciousness racism is a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges. It is not the absence of consciousness (that is, not unconsciousness) but an impaired consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race as compared to, for example, critical consciousness" (p. 135).

In reference to King's words, it wasn't really an idea that was part of the theories about schools during the time when I was there. The development of any real sense of being conscious rather came from discussions with my husband who was in graduate school when I began my entry into teaching in the classroom. However, it must be said that even when you become aware of what it is that you should be working towards enacting, there are so many factors that stop you from truly engaging in critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Essentially what occurs is that the majority of your time is spent with acts of micro resistance and with the few and far between overt actions that leave you sick. The micro resistance then becomes lost

over time and it's not those minor attempts that become the critical incidents rather it's the ones that you lose sleep over when you worry about responses from the administration, peers, parents and community. This is probably why they are so few and far between.

As someone who now teaches at the university level, I disagree with the often repeated notion (and one that I have to admit held myself at one time) that there is such a large chasm between academics and "the real world of teaching". But the one reality that did and does still exist is the fear. Teachers often pride themselves on being the vanguard for change but after two plus decades of teaching, I am starting to agree with the social theorists that state that schools are a reflection of society; we change only when society changes.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The conversation continues for another day

Literacy is about more than reading and writing – it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture. Literacy ... finds its place in our lives alongside other ways of communicating. Indeed, literacy itself takes many forms: on paper, on the computer screen, on TV, on posters and signs. Those who use literacy take it for granted – but those who cannot use it are excluded from much communication in today's world. Indeed, it is the excluded who can best appreciate the notion of "literacy as freedom".

(UNESCO, Statement for the United Nations Literacy Decade, 2003–2012)

What We Need to Remember

Understanding how children learn, and particularly how they learn language, allows teachers to select the strategies and provide instruction that will develop a deep and critical understanding of the world. Hall and Piazza (2008) reiterate this consideration by reminding us that critical literacy is a reader's ability to "become aware of the messages that texts communicate about power, race, and gender; who should receive privileges; and who has been or continues to be oppressed" (p. 32). It is in this context that critical literacy is important for the teacher and the student. Critical literacy is not an "add-on" activity; it is a deeper, active approach to understanding language and making meaning (Tompkins et al., 2011, p. 14).

It goes beyond the informative *what* of language to its *how*, *why* and *so what?* It goes beyond the reader's competency and comprehension to require a capacity for reflective insight. It asks the reader to "read" a text's symbolism in a philosophical and political context and discern its cultural influences and the writer's craft. (Ibid, p.14)

Critical literacy enables not only the comprehension of the text, but also its implications for our own lives (Shor, 2003, p. 1). Literacy is, therefore, a political act that serves to challenge the status quo (Comber and Simpson, 2001); an emancipatory process of self-awareness and self-determination that ultimately makes social transformation possible (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

This can occur in all classrooms according to a report on literacy produced by the government of Ontario entitled, *Literacy for Learning: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy in Grade 4 to 6 in Ontario*, which upon reading fits in seamlessly with Québec's curriculum views and as well echoes the understandings of the countless theorists and experts in the field that have been referenced and quoted throughout this piece of writing, if teachers are clear about what critical literacy skills they need to teach and more importantly, the reasons why. The panel of literacy experts reiterate the standpoint that:

Critical literacy skills give students the tools they need to think more deeply about the texts they meet and the texts they create. They challenge the learner to look beyond the literal message, to read between the lines, to observe what is present and what is missing, and to reflect on the context and the way the author constructed the text to influence the reader. Critical literacy goes beyond conventional critical thinking, because it focuses on questions about fairness, equity, and social justice.

Students in elementary school typically think that texts are true simply because they are in print or online. Practising critical literacy encourages students to question the authority of texts and to address issues of bias and perspective. Students learn that texts are not neutral: all texts in some way reflect the choices, positions, and beliefs of their creators, and could be constructed differently to present different understandings. Critical literacy is not a "thing" to be added to the literacy program or something to do each day for ten minutes before lunch. It is a lens or overlay for viewing texts that becomes a regular part of classroom practice. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p.9)

Critical literacy practices can be effectively introduced orally during read-alouds or shared reading. These imperative oral discussions give students the opportunity to develop and clarify their understandings within a social situation that exposes them to the opinions of their peers. Critical literacy practices can also provide students with opportunities to develop written responses to and critiques of texts.

In reflecting back to not only my own teaching history, but to the thinking and writing of the various experts in the field to whom have been referred in this thesis, it goes without saying that working towards critical literacy is not unproblematic. Comber (2001) sums up this challenging pedagogical step forward as she reminds us that at the very root of critical literacy is the demand for teachers to examine the way they read the world and what we take for granted. She asks,

How does one immersed in and constructed by a particular culture manage to stand out of it and examine some of its integral and implicit tenets? And it is not always obvious what the payoffs might be. Critical analysis requires interrogating what texts tell us about the way things are and why. This is not straightforward, as most of us have learned to defer to the authority of the text. (p. 272)

A running theme throughout this thesis has been the need for teachers, myself included, to be reflective practionners (beyond the obligatory diary-keeping model that has been part and parcel of many pre-service teacher programs) and more importantly, continue to work on building our teacher knowledge and analytical capacities. Ways that this can be fostered for the dedicated and determined teacher lay in considering the following actions and asking key deep rooted inquiry questions:

- Undertake demographics analyses of school populations

- Who are these children?
- Who are their families?
- What are their incomes?
- What are their educational histories?
- Learning how to see communities anthropologically
 - How do these young people lead their various lives?
 - What are their “functions of knowledge”?
- Developing linguistic knowledge
 - What are the language practices and representational resources these students have?
 - What kinds of genres, registers, fields of knowledge do students need to learn? Do teachers already have this knowledge?
 - How do persuasive and authoritative texts work linguistically?
 - What can replicate for our own ends? What needs to be interrogated, resisted and contested?
- Revising what we know about pedagogy
 - What are the effects of this practice on different groups of students?
 - What are we being loyal to in preserving this approach? Does it have the effects we intended? How will we know how it’s working and who it works for?
 - Where does literacy pedagogy begin and end?
- Re-imagining what counts as literacy in new times and new literacies
 - What new forms of techno-textual practices do teachers and students need to learn? (Comber, 2001, pp. 272-273)

What this drives home once again is that in order to enact a pedagogy of critical literacy in the elementary classroom teachers need a great deal more than deciding that will simply “be critical” of the texts they are reading and writing as well as the conversations they are having with their students.

Where We Need to Go Next

A regressive politics of knowledge helps produce a technicist education that is more concerned with “how to” than “why” questions. (...) Imagining what could be — a central goal of any critical pedagogy — has no place in such regressive schools. (Kincheloe, 2008, p.4)

Through the writing of this thesis, a major idea for further study arose that I am interested to investigate further. As research and publications of what critical literacy is and what one is supposed to do to in today’s elementary classrooms are finding their way into the hands of concerned and dedicated teachers everywhere, what is needed to move these professionals from reading and imagining what could be to actually living out this curriculum with their own students is real life examples of what other like minded teachers have actually designed and implemented in classrooms across Québec and North America.

The stories of their journeys, of their struggles and of their successes will permit others to take the risk to do the same. It’s the printed knowledge, there in black and white, which will offer the support committed educators need. A text that will defend and encourage teachers and administrators who want to enact a critical literacy curriculum in their schools and classrooms.

In the manner in which Ira Shore and Caroline Pari's *Education is Politics* (1999) presented a collection of essays by teachers who wrote stories based on their classroom practice as influenced by Paulo Freire, I would like to gather and share with others in the field personal narratives of breathing life into an emancipatory curriculum which utilizes critical literacy as the vehicle to move each and every one involved forward and straight into the 21st century in which we are living.

It's not about being radical, it's not about being revolutionary, it's about knowing the difference this type of curriculum can make. All it takes is some ingenuity by a group of compassionate teachers committed to transformation in and beyond the classroom. It is truly awesome to think about what can be done with some risk and experimentation.

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