

Education in the 21st Century: Critical Literacy and Agonistic Conflict as a Response to Current Issues (of Justice)

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Given the complexities of education in the 21st century, how might transformative approaches to literacy, a critical literacy embedded in social justice, offer one way of responding to current issues? My interest in this question emerges from my work as a classroom teacher working with diverse students for ten years. In my work with elementary school students (Grades 3 to 8), my approaches to teaching aligned with critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2007; Andrade and Morell, 2008). That is, I sought to engage students in societal critique through dialogue, and to foster various forms of social action as responses to the issues we explored. I wanted my students to be literate, I believed they were capable of high levels of literacy, and believed that their literacy could be a tool to explore the underlying causes of injustice and take action to redress them. I often aimed at what Lesko and Bloom refer to as “happy-ever-after endings” (1998, p. 390): I hoped students felt good about our learning, their social action, the money and awareness we raised for particular justice initiatives, and about the people the social action aimed to help. In my teaching, I found that providing opportunities for critical talk in response to various texts and opportunities for drama improvisation activities to be powerful ways to engage students in the complexities of social justice issues, particularly those students who seemed to be disengaged during more traditional instructional approaches. Such in and out of role talk was my way of getting students passionate about an issue, and to foster embodied responses to texts that I (as teacher) introduced.

I felt at the time that I experienced success in engaging students using dialogic and dramatic pedagogies associated with critical literacy. I taught in a school where most of the students identified as White and middle to upper-middle class. Students at this school responded with enthusiasm to my conceptions of social justice and my connected literacy practices. For example, I often invited analysis and critique of various media texts, organized community service learning projects, and accompanied students to demonstrations aimed at raising awareness of various issues that students and I associated with local and global injustice. We often discussed the plight of Others¹. I began to wonder, however, why my students seemed to be buying in to my pedagogy. I wondered whether or not what we were doing was actually working toward social justice.

When I began teaching at a large elementary school populated by students who had recently immigrated to Canada (many under refugee claims), were racially marginalized, and/or were of lower socio-economic status, this challenged my prior conceptions of critical literacy work embedded in social justice. Many of these students did not seem to respond as positively to what I considered important issues (that I assumed were also important to them). My new context provoked questions about what I was doing, how I was doing it, for whom, and the role played by my gender, racial and class privilege in my attempts at transformative social justice teaching. I began to wonder whether my teaching reflected and valued these students’ lived experiences. When I became an equity consultant for my school board, I continued to question the relationships between my (and other teachers’) experiences, those of my (and their) students, and the realities of people directly harmed in the issues I addressed. I wondered: How did students with different social identities and life experiences interpret my pedagogy and content? Why did some students seem to care about issues of justice (as I presented them), and

others not? How might conflict be a productive component of critical literacy for social justice, and what diverse ways could students demonstrate their “literacy”?

In North America, the term ‘social justice’ has become a catch phrase in education circles, with many schools, school boards, and faculties of education incorporating it into their mission statements and curriculum documents. Indeed, diverse understandings of social justice manifest themselves through various approaches to education. For example, anti-oppressive, multicultural, and democratic citizenship education all, to various extents and with different emphases, claim to incorporate social justice goals. These approaches reject current neoliberal trends in education that are manifested through pervasive standardized testing, scripted curriculum, and continued disparities in the educational achievement of groups marginalized by racism and poverty. Many critical scholars argue that an emphasis on curriculum standards and testing functions to privilege certain perspectives and dominant groups in society (De Lissovoy, 2015; Kumashiro, 2009) and marginalize Others. Such neoliberal trends challenge teachers who wish to work through critical literacies with students to address injustice (Ayers et al, 2009; Kumashiro, 2009; Soloman & Singer, 2011). At the same time, some researchers argue that social justice approaches risk imposing perspectives rather than acknowledging diverse student experiences and intersubjective constructions of knowledge (Sonu, 2009a). Social justice education is a complicated endeavor, defined and practiced for particular goals, and situated within particular contexts.

Critical literacy scholars, such as Allan Luke, Barbara Comer, and Vivian Vazquez, focus directly on literacy practices that manifest in classrooms, and what those literacy practices mean for addressing broad issues of social justice. Critical literacy practice involves teachers in weaving critical questions about various texts into the fabric of everyday life at school. This paper builds on such work focused on critical literacy teaching in elementary school classrooms, and student responses to it – in particular, I frame critical literacy as students’ encounters with texts and with each other. Such encounters can include opportunities for students to engage rich talk – dramatic in-role talk included - in relation to multiple text forms. These opportunities are meaning making events-where the analysis of power relations can potentially provoke creative responses.

I present and discuss two vignettes from two urban elementary classroom case studies— a grade 6 class in a demographically mixed area and a grade 8 class in an economically and racially marginalized neighborhood in Southern Ontario, Canada. The teachers in these classrooms regularly implemented dialogic literacy pedagogies on conflictual social justice topics. I also worked with small groups of students from these classrooms, and engaged them in improvised drama session (described below). Teachers’ and my own pedagogies included not purely talk or deliberation, but emotive political exchanges, embodying neither fixed identities, fixed social positions, nor straightforward solutions to complex issues. Within this paper, I explore moments of paradox, concurrence and dissonance between two educators’ (one classroom teacher and myself as researcher) intentions and various students’ responses. These moments illustrate the possible dangers, and transformative potential of eliciting conflictual exchanges in the critical exploration of issues associated with social justice.

Transformative Social Justice Education & Literacy

Applied to curriculum practice, critical pedagogies embody the theory that classroom pedagogy can contribute to social transformation toward justice, by inviting and facilitating student expression and collective interrogation of their lived experiences. Such pedagogy also invites students to recognize and critique societal patterns that cause and maintain oppression, aiming to develop individual and collective agency to overcome such injustice (Duncan-

Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Early critical scholars, inspired by the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, primarily drew upon a social-economic class analysis, challenging the inequitable distribution of resources reinforced by discrimination and ideology promulgated in schooling (Giroux, 2004; Hoy, 2004; Simon, 2002). In addition to the inequitable distribution of resources, transformative approaches to justice education attend to ideological dominance and the misrecognition or denial of difference (e.g. Apple, 1979; Bernstein, 1975; Anyon, 1980). Central to critical pedagogy are Freire's (1970) notions of conscientization and praxis – that students and teachers together develop critical self-consciousness and agency through mutual dialogue that critically examines and informs actions to change oppressive ideologies and structures that constitute barriers to autonomy, justice, and humanized social relations. It is upon such notions that critical literacy scholarship and practice has developed (Comber, 2014, Luke and Freebody, 1999).

The assumptions that such rational positivist critical pedagogies would necessarily yield 'empowerment' for all students in diverse groups, and that individual empowerment would necessarily lead to social change, has been roundly challenged (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; North, 2006). In response, post-structural theories in education attend to the inequities of mutual respect students bring with them into the classroom, while embracing the emotion, unpredictability and uncertainty inherent in teaching and learning (Britzman, 1998; Ellsworth, 2005). Post-structural scholarship foregrounds the intersubjectivity of relational experiences, in place of rationalist critical pedagogic assumptions that identities are fixed, knowable or predictable. Thus enactment and recognition of diverse identities, in the context of social or pedagogical movement toward social justice, involves the continual formation of selves in encounters with others. Judith Butler (2003b) explains:

...we are not separate identities in the struggle for recognition, but already involved in a reciprocal exchange which dislocates us from our positions, our subject positions, and allows us to see that community itself requires the recognition that we are all in different ways, striving for recognition. (p. 91)

Thus, recognition of intersubjectivity in the context of inequitable social positioning, rejects essentialized identities and instead aims to co-create new collective possibilities. In order to discern and discuss some tensions and potential synergies between critical and post-structural understandings of such pedagogies, this paper explores what intersubjective, socially transformative approaches to critical literacy education may actually look and sound like in public classrooms. Specifically, I examine one observational vignette of one teachers' critical literacy pedagogy for social justice, and one vignette from an improvised drama session I facilitated with a small group of students. These were encounters in which intersecting, subjectively experienced identities and unequal statuses were performed, negotiated, and (re)created. My aim is to show how a teachers' and researcher's use of dialogic pedagogies (which included drama) within critical literacy contexts, may open spaces for students' creative criticality and intersubjective encounters with social justice issues. Such facilitated encounters can move from literacy as mere reading, writing, and talk involving students' predictable analyses of 'given' social inequalities, toward unleashing risky yet powerful learning opportunities.

Dialogue and Agonistic, Generative Conflict Pedagogies

Critical literacy embedded in transformative justice education goals demand action for social and political change, assumed to both provoke and emerge from contestation, uncertainty, and conflict. Conflict refers not to violence, necessarily, but to any opposing interests, disagreement, or struggle for power and resources. Conflict theorists and critical

theorists (Apple, 2004; Bickmore, 2014a; Davies, 2014; Lederach, 2004) describe the constructive potential of conflict, and dialogue about conflict, to provoke learning, political conscientization, and disruption of existing injustices. Open channels and inclusive processes for participatory dialogue, dissent, negotiation, and collective deliberation are key pedagogical ingredients that may allow conflict to play a constructive role in democracy and in social justice learning (Bickmore, 2008). Dialogue about conflict, therefore, is potentially generative in curriculum (Freire, 1970): it embodies acknowledgment and engagement of divergent perspectives, interests, needs, identities and experiences to create meaning, however uncertain, which may disrupt the assumed dominance of certain perspectives. Improvised dialogic and dramatic encounters associated with critical literacy may create channels for such participation in critique and reinvention of understandings (Davies, 2014; O'Toole et al., 2004), and thereby opportunities for interruption of *status quo* assumptions.

Conflict is an unavoidable part of social and political life, which can be (but too often is not) channeled in productive, educative ways. Antagonistic conflict is raw, aggressive and sometimes violent, associated with competing moral norms of right, wrong, and rejection. "Agonistic conflict," on the other hand, refers to a "vibrant clash of political positions" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 16) in which participants are (constructive) political adversaries in a *shared* social process, rather than (destructive) moral opponents (see also Mouffe, 2005). Agonism, approached from a poststructural perspective, offers an alternative to the deliberative democratic (rationalist critical pedagogy) approaches inspired by Frankfurt School critical theorist Habermas (1996). Habermas assumed deliberative democratic dialogue to involve intentional exchange of divergent perspectives, rationally and civilly shared, defended, and analyzed in order to create consensus on how to address issues. Following poststructuralist education scholars including Todd (2009, 2010), Ellsworth (1997, 2005), Lather (1998), and Ruitenberg (2009) I emphasize intersubjective social relations, passion and emotion, while continuing to affirm the educative potential of conflictual encounters.

For conflict in curriculum to generate expression and exchange of multiple, dissenting perspectives, agonistic (inclusive and democratic) pedagogical structures are required (Bickmore, 2014b; Davies, 2004). However, agonistic approaches do not assume or imply consensual norms or set boundaries of rational discourse. I am not very optimistic about Habermasian rational deliberation toward shared understanding and consensus. As an alternative, I examine in the vignettes below the enactment of passionate talk-based and drama-based critical literacy pedagogies on power-imbalanced justice issues, and their implications for opening up all kinds of fluid relational social conflicts as potentially transformative learning spaces. Critical literacy that includes opportunities for improvised (dramatic) encounters is an example of pedagogies that may enable (re) creation of meaning, thus possibilities for collectively creating new forms of the self within diverse, unpredictable, inequitable social-political contexts.

Intersections: Social Justice Education & Generative Conflict Embedded within Critical Literacy

Critical theories influence my understandings of teachers and students' political conceptions and aims, while post-structural theories inform my understandings of identities and pedagogical interactions as intersubjective, relational, and ungovernable. My analysis below of two vignettes of agonistic conflict and literacy pedagogies and student engagement with those pedagogies - what I call "dramatic encounters" considers the tensions and intersections between critical and post-structural approaches in social justice education.

Diverse students in these classrooms engaged with their teacher's and my pedagogies in various ways, influenced by their previous experiences, outside and in schools, as knowledge (re) creation encounters. School-based learning is grounded in the relationships between teachers and students, and among students, embedded in particular places and times. Individuals may be shaped by, and simultaneously help to shape, such relational learning environments.

Critical literacy, connected with drama and conflict pedagogies, can focus on opportunities for rich, issues based on talk. These opportunities can elicit generative conflict and offers opportunities for diverse, unequally positioned students to construct and communicate their feelings and understandings, and to encounter and respond to those of others. Such opportunities invite exploration of difference between what students seem to know (and feel) and what they may be coming to know, as well as the spaces of difference between themselves and others. Perhaps more than in balanced, rationally oriented dialogue pedagogies, agonistic conflictual encounters allow students' affective and relational identities to emerge, evolve, and come into play in the ways they communicate meanings related to social (in)justice. Every student forms conceptions and responds in varied ways to issues-based texts, based on the fluidity of knowledge creation - influenced by, but not determined by, previous experiences embedded in social structures, inside and beyond the classroom.

Such knowledge creation is deeply tied to critical literacy. According to Allan Luke, critical literacy is not a "method" or technique, but a disposition: one that involves a critical and constructive cynicism toward various forms of text. Building upon work in critical pedagogy, Luke identifies the core question of critical literacy as understanding the relationship between a re-presentation (discourse, written text, image, etc) and reality, and dissecting conflicting sources and forms of information. According to Luke, students need to be taught a "repertoire of strategies" to read the world. Such strategies may move experiences and perspectives. A literate learner also takes on the role of code user. Code users recognize and mobilize the features and structures of various texts, and use visual and non-visual cues to "break the code" of texts. A literate learner is also a text user. That is, they understand the purpose and audience of a text – and that understanding helps determine the way it is constructed. Learners use this knowledge to consume texts, as well as to create them. Finally, a literate learner is a text analyzer. That is, they understand that all texts have bias and represent particular values, beliefs, and perspectives. They also understand that some values, beliefs and perspectives may have been omitted. Also, texts can be critiqued, and inform how and when students may take action on an issue. In the vignettes I describe and analyze below, students often moved well beyond comprehension of texts, and past analysis to create new "texts" through their encounters. These encounters, as Comber suggests, are examples of critical literacies that "involve people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life ... and to question practices of privilege and injustice." (2001, p. 173). Agonistic conflict was a catalyst for using language in such a way so as to create opportunities for meaning making and creativity. Any dialogic encounter with conflict involves uncertainty in the creative emergence of social expression. What is powerful about critical literacy pedagogies that focus on both dramatic and non-dramatic talk is that such uncertainty, creativity, and engaged emotion are taken up as resources, not understood as distractors or problems to be shut down. Thus, curriculum (and inquiry) unfolds with every learning event. I have selected two vignettes illustrating particular ways that one teacher, and myself as researcher, implemented and interpreted particular episodes of critical literacy pedagogies students beyond basic comprehension to using and analyzing texts for a range of purposes.

According to Luke and Freebody (1999), students need experience and practice in what they term "Four Roles of the Literate Learner". A literate learner takes on the role of meaning maker – they use prior knowledge and/or experiences to construct and communicate meaning

when engaging in literacy work. Here, the learner participates in text, forming and communicating their interpretation of texts in relation to their own experiences and perspectives. A literate learner also takes on the role of code user. Code users recognize and mobilize the features and structures of various texts, and use visual and non-visual cues to “break the code” of texts. A literate learner is also a text user. That is, they understand the purpose and audience of a text – and that understanding helps determine the way it is constructed. Learners use this knowledge to consume texts, as well as to create them. Finally, a literate learner is a text analyzer. That is, they understand that all texts have bias and represent particular values, beliefs, and perspectives. They also understand that some values, beliefs and perspectives may have been omitted. Also, texts can be critiqued, and inform how and when students may take action on an issue.

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METHODS

For the purpose of this paper, I selected two vignettes from a larger research project focused on 3 case studies of grade 4-8 classrooms in which teachers engaged critical social justice education – one from a classroom lessons of one of those teachers, and one improvised drama session facilitated by the researcher - as the best illustrations of the particular challenges and opportunities of critical literacy approaches to risky social justice in these classrooms. Data collected included *semi-structured interviews* with the classroom teacher, *participant observation* in the classroom, and *improvised drama methods* (improvised drama sessions) with a small group of students.

I was participant observer in a series of lessons facilitated by the teacher with her own students. I observed student responses to their teacher’s pedagogies and content, and to each other, in each classroom setting. Teachers’ perceptions of classroom events, elicited through interviews, were supplemented by direct observations of those events. Participant observations recorded how the teacher demonstrated their approach to social justice education and critical literacy, and how they framed questions of conflict and difference in relation to social justice education. They also recorded how students engaged and responded to their teacher’s (a my) pedagogies. All names of teachers, students and schools, below, are pseudonyms.

I also facilitated improvised drama sessions with a small group of students from each class. In each session, I engaged a small group of student-participants (six to nine students from each class who had volunteered to participate) in drama work. Data emerged from the improvised dramatic interactions of each group (Cohen et al., 2007), including preparation, dramatic activity (in-role) in response to various texts, and ensuing dialogue (out-of-role). The purpose of the improvised drama sessions was to facilitate interactions to elicit students' expression of their perceptions and understandings of social justice through dramatic representation (acting), context building discussions, and debriefing discussions. Through these activities, I aimed to provide a forum through which students could explore how their various (negotiated and fluid) social identities were performed dramatically and through related dialogue.

Vignette #1 - Dramatic dialogue (Maureen): What should be done about homelessness?

In a “dramatic deliberation” activity in her diverse grade 6 classroom at Whitfield Public School, the teacher, Maureen, asked students to take on the roles of various individuals who would have divergent perspectives about poverty and homelessness. Students articulated, in role, mostly agonistic political perspectives (linked to the identities of the character roles they played), not merely antagonistic moral stances: students imagined, enacted and challenged others' views while considering their own (Mouffe, 2000).

Maureen purposely set the stage for *dramatic* conflict. She implemented this “dramatic deliberation” activity to encourage students to imagine and enact divergent perspectives, and then to attempt to reach consensus, on the issue of homelessness and what to do about it. This involved particular rules of engagement: students prepared “position statements” to express (in role) the opinions of “stakeholders” – characters from *Trupp* (a storybook about an encounter between Trupp, an imaginary creature who left its mountain home, and Bernice, a homeless person in the big city) as well as non fictional characters from the school's own community (mayor, residents, business owners, etc.) – on how to address the problem of poverty-based homelessness. Students, in role, were to respond to the question: “What should be done about homelessness in this city?” Maureen created groups of three to four students and assigned each group a (stakeholder) character. Members of each group prepared together a written position statement: that is, they shared the responsibility for in-role writing from the perspective of the stakeholder character they were assigned.

When the dramatic deliberation itself began, one student from each stakeholder character group sat in a circle and, in turn, performed their position statements in role. After all the position statements had been performed, student small group members could replace the person representing their character in the circle at any point when they wished to add to the discussion, respond to a question, or ask a question of others. Maureen played the role of reporter – that is, as critical questioner and Devil's advocate (similar to the role of the Joker in Boal's Forum Theatre approach (2002)). Thus, she challenged the thinking expressed by the students in their roles.

Such deliberation, even when used as a critical literacy and drama approach, normally aims for reaching agreement (in contrast to debate, whose goal is to have one winner among two or more sometimes polarized perspectives). This drama activity reflected Maureen's valuing of agonistic conflict –exploration in which students could imagine others' perspectives in relation to developing understanding of their own views.

In setting the stage for improvised dramatic conflict here, Maureen elicited and expected divergent viewpoints to emerge. However, she did not know ahead of time how those interactions or viewpoints would unfold. Such an opportunity to improvise dramatically

transcended rationality and created space for students to express passionate emotion in the classroom, and to express a wide range of viewpoints unlikely to be aired in a regular classroom discussion (out of role, speaking for themselves). Thus this pedagogical strategy offers an alternative to balanced, rational deliberative dialogue, making ‘speaking’ in the classroom some unsettling viewpoints that likely existed in students’ lived experience but that they usually would not choose to espouse as their own. The dramatic deliberation structure thereby offered a springboard for emotions to be unleashed, unpredictably.

The following excerpt highlights tensions among students’ expressed perceptions of homelessness, and possible ways to address it:

SADIE [as city councilor, to Lady on Bench, who had yelled at homeless character in *Trupp*]: Do you avoid homeless people when they’re around?

SAL [as Lady on Bench]: I don’t really respond to them.

SADIE: Don’t you find that hard?

ESTHER [takes over as Lady on Bench]: Before, it was hard, but now there are shelters and things, they can use those.

TAMARA [as shelter director]: Why do you feel the need to ignore them?

CARLA [as businessman]: Well, they don’t do anything for us - they’re not that important, so why pay attention to them?

LISA [back in role as restaurant owner]: Well, saying that you don’t pay attention or ignore them, do you do that for everything else in your life - like global warming, are you going to ignore that?

TEACHER MAUREEN [in role as reporter/moderator]: Well, how about the fact that you tried to hide the homeless in the back of the restaurant and don’t let them come to the front? Isn’t that that same thing?

LISA: But we give them free food!??

[Recess bell rings, but most students do not leave their chairs]

[Amidst many voices, the following emerge]

NADIL [as Bernice, speaking to Elia, playing the businessman]: If you were homeless, would you want people to think the same way about you as you do about us?

[Everyone goes silent.]

ELIA [as businessman]: I don’t know the answer to that.

CARLA [taking over as businessman, asks Nadil (as Bernice)]: Have you ever thought about going to a shelter?

NADIL: I prefer to stay on the street.

TEACHER MAUREEN [as reporter/moderator]: Why do you prefer to stay on the street?

NADIL: The shelter is sometimes stinky, and I’m free to do what I want on the street. (Whitfield Observation, February 12).

In the above dramatic deliberation, these grade 6 students took on roles (sometimes voicing opinions contrary to their own) and engaged in conflict through questioning, voicing opposing viewpoints, and engaging in critical (dramatic) dialogue. Yet, drama’s emphasis on playing (conflicting) roles and communicating emotion distinguishes it from other forms of discussion. As Winston argues, “What matters more than what is said is what the words *do* to the characters to whom they are spoken or who speak them. What counts is their effect on the way they see their situation and how this vision defines or will redefine their subsequent actions” (2005, emphasis added, p. 113). What did these words do? I assume that, to some degree, the student participants’ actual feelings and perspectives came “through” the ways they improvised their roles’ perspectives- although, as mentioned above, at the same time their drama expanded the range of viewpoints voiced in the room—and that this process of taking a

role, hearing themselves and others, could have had an “effect on the way they [saw]” the problems of, and responses to, poverty/ homelessness in their own society.

Thus, the dramatic discussion seemed to provoke self-reflection upon students’ own attitudes and actions toward poor and homeless people they actually encountered in their own city. The drama, as a means of critical literacy, built to a point where the complexity of the issue came to light. When Nadil (as Bernice) framed a question to Elia (as businessman) about what it might feel like to be disrespected, this apparently caused the whole class to pause and reflect. Here, these students’ interpretation of homelessness as a social justice issue emphasized a concern about individual attitudes toward poor/homeless people, less than broader political and social-structural issues and proposals for poverty reduction. Some students (among those whose roles allowed this) expressed recognition of homeless people as deserving equal respect as members of society. This approach did not address the root structural causes of poverty-based homelessness nor the politics of collective response to those problems, but rather focused on individual biases and interactions with individual homeless people.

The teacher, Maureen, as the reporter/moderator, encouraged with her questions the affirmative notions of fairness and respectful inclusion. For instance, she invited students to consider their own well-intentioned action (providing food, but only outside and behind the restaurant) as they criticized another character’s general attitude toward homeless people. Toward the end of the activity, Maureen used her role again to engage in problem-posing (conflict): building on Carla’s question (as businessman) about shelters and Nadil’s response (as homeless person Bernice), to raise social-structural questions about whether shelters were a solution to the causes of homelessness. Thus Maureen’s provocations enabled Nadil (as Bernice) to bring to light a complex, challenging perspective that had not yet been brought up in this class’s exploration of homelessness: that affirmative short term remedies (non-confrontational, ameliorative approaches such as shelters) do not provide complete answers to the issue.

In this vignette from Maureen’s classroom, improvised dramatic in-role dialogue agonistically addressed divergent perspectives-replacing competitive (antagonistic) debate, and simultaneously not teaching or assuming universal conceptions of right and wrong. Students articulated, in role, political differences embedded in intersubjective social relations, not just moral stances. That is, students used political referents that “[sought to] organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 15). They carried out their dramatic dialogue within the context of the organized ensemble of practices, discourses, and institutions (that is, a social context) associated with poverty and homelessness in their particular urban Canadian setting. Students dramatically expressed, responded to, and later analyzed opposing political positions in relation to this social context. Thus, although the dramatic deliberation expanded the range of viewpoints expressed (and responded to) compared to what might have arisen in an ordinary classroom discussion, the conflict in this instance remained agonistic. This was a deeply engaged yet non-competitive opportunity for students to imagine, enact, and constructively challenge others’ views, while noticing and considering their own – all characteristics of a critical literacy approach embedded in social justice.

This dramatic deliberation vignette thus illustrates an alternate way of deliberating - unpredictable, complex, and passionate – that did not attempt to balance the discussion, to limit talk to what dominant discourses consider rational, or to force consensus. The initial structure of the activity was based on particular norms of communication outlined by teacher Maureen: to develop and then share contrasting position statements, one at a time, and then students, one at a time and remaining in role, asking questions of each other. Later, the deliberation drama unfolded in a less orderly, more unpredictable way: in role, students raised questions about

poverty, homelessness, and existing power relations. The students expressed with passion and listened intently to divergent yet agonistic perspectives. Their high level of engagement was evidenced by most students' unwillingness to stop the drama activity when the recess bell rang.

A critical literacy pedagogy that blends drama and conflict invites interplay between dramatic perspective and individual perspective: "the dialogical relationship between the material subject (and [their] histories) and the imagined one" (Gallagher, 2007, p. 85). Students participated and made decisions, within the drama, about their characters' views toward a real issue (homelessness), while also considering the impact of the issue on their own real lives and the world. Debriefing reflections, in particular, facilitated a balance between the "role and the real" (Booth, 2005, p. 105). While balancing the role and the real may allow students to make complex meaning, tensions also emerged among the issue of homelessness, students' previously held views, and what happened in the drama. Teacher Maureen, in a post-activity interview, highlighted the conflict that some students had experienced when they were assigned to play a role that reflected a perspective very different from their own convictions. Within such struggles, students negotiated their own conceptions and perspectives. Students' perspectives on homelessness may not have shifted substantially over the course of this one activity, but it was an opportunity to provoke students' thinking and further dialogue. The tensions as well as the dialogue within the dramatic encounter invited students to question their own understandings, and potentially to modify their existing understandings, from both inside and outside the drama experience. Beyond "rational" deliberation, the dramatic encounters described above involved emotive, intersubjective political exchanges without offering any straightforward solution to a complex issue. Thus, this episode, as a blend of critical literacy, social justice, drama and conflict, opened up rather than closed or narrowed, democratic space and democratic engagement on a human level.

Talking Back Responding to Personal Misrecognition

In session with the drama group from Andre's class at Valley Public School, Grade 8 students refashioned my attempt to have them analyze stereotypes of others, and insisted that they instead talk back to stereotypes they themselves had faced. Valley Public School was located in the oldest public housing community in Canada, and was characterized by a high poverty rate. Almost all of Andre's students were racialized, and experienced poverty. I devised an improvised drama session that built on these students' expressed concerns about identity and stereotypes, by presenting the the short film *Silent Beats* created by Jon M. Chu as a pre-text for further dramatic work. The film explores two characters' (one White, one East Asian) perceptions of and assumptions about a Black boy as he enters a convenience store. I hoped to engage students in a critical reading of the text (the film) in relation to their own experiences – to support meaning making and as a provocation for text analysis (Luke and Freebody, 1999). I also hoped to provoke a creative response among students. Students provided their analysis and connections to the film in a discussion after watching. They spoke about and named the various stereotypes the characters in the film had of each other. One student, Silvia connected the film to the murder of a young Black man, Trayvon Martin, in the U.S. in February of 2012:

It's kinda like the situation of that boy who got shot cus somebody thought he had a gun on him, but he only had [ice tea] and [candy]. So, I guess, they were thinking on the video that Black kids steal and are bad. (Valley Public School, Improvised Drama Session, November 1, 2012)

Hamsa added a stereotype that he connected with:

It's kinda of like how most people automatically assume how, Muslims when they're in the airport and everything, when they're trying to catch a plane or something, when they go through security and all that, they automatically assume their terrorists or something. So it's like as soon as the Black guy walked in, both the Asian man and the [White] lady automatically thought that he had a criminal record and that he slept on the street. (Valley Public School, Improvised Drama Session, November 1, 2012)

Hamsa, Silvia, and others' responses showed their awareness of stereotypes, and I thought students could use the film, as well as their discussion of the film, as a starting point from which to dramatize how they, in role, would talk back to (challenge) those stereotypes. This was my way of provoking an agonistic challenge or conflict with societal beliefs and assumptions. I asked students to individually select one of the three characters - the young Black man, an older White woman, and an East Asian male store clerk - and to think about the assumptions of the character they had selected.

I asked students to improvise a "talk back" (hooks, 1989) to the stereotypes projected toward the character they had selected. Most students were reluctant to volunteer a performance. After much encouragement, some students volunteered to take part. After a few attempts, it was clear from their body language and reluctance that some of the students did not wish to engage with the exercise. As one student finished a short performance of talking back as the store clerk, Amina and Shila shouted out to me as facilitator almost impatiently, "Can we do it about us?!".

Students' drama and talk about the film reflected their own struggles with the content, and it became clear that the students in this group at Valley Public School wanted to rewrite stereotypes using improvised performance drawn from their own experiences. It was like they felt they did not need to learn about stereotypes by hearing about (or addressing dramatically) stereotypes some people have of others. They were uncomfortable portraying others talking back to stereotypes: they had their own bodily knowledge, based on their own experiences, that they wished to perform. This was process of recognition - whereby the students saw themselves reflected in the film, but still wished to remain separate (Butler, 2003a). The videorecorded performances of these improvisations focus on each student's face and upper body, sitting in a chair, with students facing and talking directly into the camera. Julian excitedly indicated that he wanted to perform first. He sat, initially with a smile on his face, and proceeded to stop smiling after a few seconds and perform the following in an animated, indignant way:

Do you think I eat burritos and tacos everyday watching novellas in Spanish? Do you think that all Spanish people get pregnant at the age of 16? Do you think we cut our baby's stomachs and put drugs in them and take them to the airport as real babies? No we don't. Do you think we're all in gangs, and we sell drugs and all these things? [Pause] Do you think that just because I speak Spanish, that I'm from Mexico? Mexicans are not the only people who speak Spanish in this world. There's Columbia, El Salvador....There's Cuba, Puerto Rico, and [out of breath and smiling]. (Valley Public School, Improvised Drama Session, November 1, 2012).

Hamsa, a Bengali Muslim male student, was encouraged by his peers to go next in the group. He was reluctant, and began and stopped two times before he improvised the following:

You think I'm a curry eater? I don't eat curry all day with my family. Everybody thinks I'm Indian. I'm not Indian alright. There are Bengali, there are Sri Lankan and Pakistani. You know I don't sit at home and eat rice and curry and all these things that you people say I eat. I play soccer with my friends. I play with my friends everyday. I'm not a poor kid on the street asking for money. C'mon guys! (Valley Public School, Improvised Drama Session, November 1, 2012).

Hamsa's performance took the form of pleading with those who made assumptions about him. Shila, a Bengali Muslim female, volunteered to perform immediately after Hamsa did. She also started and stopped a few times before performing what is excerpted below. She performed with what I interpreted as an indignant smile throughout, using her body to emphasize her words by rising from the chair at times, and using varied intonation as she spoke:

Do you think just because I'm Brown I eat curry all day? Or I'm from India? No. Do you think my parents beat me just because I'm Brown? No. [rises slightly from her chair, then sits] Do you think my dad beats my mom, and doesn't let her do anything or go anywhere? [rises again from her chair as she speaks and sits again] No. I go to school, my mom goes to work. We do what we need to do. [Pauses. Laughs]

Do you think that I'm a terrorist just because I'm Muslim? No. Do you think I wear this same scarf everyday? No. Do you think....uh...ya. [Laughter.]

Do you think all I play is cricket [getting up from chair moving toward camera, and swinging a pointed finger at it], No! [shouted]. (Valley Public School, Improvised Drama Session, November 1, 2012).

All three of these students' improvised talking back to unjust (stereotyped) assumptions and representations that, in their experience they had found repeated by peers, media, and others. They sought affirmation that they really were not what those others assumed. Their improvisations reflected the complexity of identity - students strategically named typical representations in order to challenge practices and views that impacted negatively their lived experiences. In some cases, they did so by differentiating "between different kinds of difference" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 194). Shila, in particular, highlighted the intersectionality of identity - placing importance on how her identities were constructed, interrelated, and how they affected each other - as she addressed not only cultural artifacts such as food (curry) and sport (cricket), but also race and gender relations in families. She also talked about Islamophobia, specifically her experience as a Muslim young woman wearing a hijab. Her performance, sparked by her and her peers' desire to enact their own talk backs during an improvised drama session showed how drama as a ways to engage critical literacy, became a point of departure for them to communicate their identity-linked conceptions and responses to injustice. When they saw an opportunity, students recreated how they understood others viewed them. As hooks (2004) maintains:

We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves - to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are action - a resistance" (p. 28).

These students' talk backs reflected places of struggle and revealed their conceptions of how they could enact their agency for social justice in relation to intersecting notions of identity. Misrecognition of their identities could not be atoned by simply celebrating their cultures, but by challenging dominant representations of themselves in a way that drew attention to injustice, and that reflected some of their pride and anger. When Shila was finished her performance, Amina, an Ethiopian Muslim female, who chose not to perform that day, could be heard singing off camera, as Shila walked away from the performance chair:

AMINA [singing]: I'm a Muslim girl and I'm proud and I'm free.

SHILA: I'm a Brown princess.

AMINA: I'm a Muslim girl and I'm proud and I'm free.

(Valley Public School, Improvised Drama Session, November 1, 2012)

Thus, the challenge to misrecognition, or the devaluing of one's identity (Fraser, 2003), in Shila's performance sparked explicit identity affirmation for and from Amina, which Shila

shared. The words Amina sang challenge any assumption that she, as a Muslim girl, was not “proud” and “free”.

At the end of the improvised drama session with these six students, the rest of the students began to enter the classroom. As I was thanking everyone for another great session, Julian asked me to turn the camera on to him one more time. I did not know what he wished to do, but I began to video record. He improvised a talk back that focused on another of his identities – being a member of the Valleydale community:

Do you think that just because I live in Valleydale that my mom's a prostitute and my dad's a drug dealer? Do you think that I don't go to school? And that I'm in gangs, and I sleep with cockroaches and rats? No. I have a proper mattress and... [Julian laughs while falling off his chair and other students' laughter can be heard off camera]. (Valley Public School, Improvised Drama Session, November 1, 2012).

These “talk backs” communicated students' struggles for recognition, and particularly this final talk back from Julian communicated how issues of recognition are intertwined with issues of redistribution. These young people demanded the opportunity for selfrepresentation, in order to challenge the stereotypical representations they believed that others held of them based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender *and* class. Most of the students in this improvised drama session group, while they refused to take on the roles of characters in the film, *Silent Beats* in the way I had planned (as researcher facilitator), insisted that they play a role in “making themselves”:

We do not represent ready-made selves to one another: we do not encounter the other and then simply present or re-present what is already true about us, what is already constituted in us, what is already known about us. In the encounter with the other, we are perhaps always somewhat strange to ourselves, for the other addresses us in ways that make assumptions about who we are, what we stand for, what the limits of our thinking and commitments might be. But if we undergo the experience of dialogue, then we enter the conversation as one kind of person but emerge as another kind. (Butler 2003b, p. 82).

As a kind of summary of all the talkbacks, Julian challenged misrecognition of not only his ethno-racial affiliations, but also his identification with another diverse political collective with shared identity - the Valleydale community, with its shared socio-economic characterizations. These young people's talkbacks simultaneously affirmed and dislocated them from their subject positions. Social justice for these students was about their response to the material and symbolic conditions that made up their everyday experiences. Julian, with his performance, made clear the fact that they were part of a community that was frequently marginalized by forces attempting to revitalize or redevelop it. Many friends and family members of the students had been asked to leave their homes recently, and watched as their homes were demolished, not sure where they might be going, nor when or if they would be coming back to the Valleydale community. Moreover, the students were studying in a temporary school building that was in disrepair. It was within these conditions that the young people at Valley Public School created their talkbacks.

Students' talk-backs were an opportunity for them to engage in agonistic dialogue, particularly with those (not present) who might make assumptions about who they are. These Valley Public School students took risks and spoke about their personal experiences of discrimination, and supported each other in their collective struggles for recognition. They not only related their personal stories through the talkbacks, but also initiated an interruption of stereotypical representations of themselves. Many young people (especially those marginalized by dominant society's response to their community, race, gender, language, ethnicity and other identities) feel misunderstood by people outside their school and community (Gallagher, 2014). These talk backs had not been not part of my plan. The students took it upon themselves to

challenge the stereotypes they experienced with their improvised words. In many ways, they performed *and* (re-) created their identities simultaneously in those moments - through their performances, they made meaning in ways that I could not have predicted.

DISCUSSION

The pedagogies described in both of the vignettes above were designed to provide opportunities for students to engage in passionate exchange, including expressing disagreement, guided by purposeful, critical questioning on a justice issue. How do (and 'should') teachers scaffold (inform, support and focus) dialogue that engages conflict and responds to issues of justice? In the first vignette, Maureen scaffolded students' expression and consideration of a wide range of viewpoints through a dramatic deliberation exercise, which elicited quite a vibrant agonistic exchange. Dramatic encounters in the context of critical literacy invite (or are surprised by) varied forms of student agency and engagement. The teachers participating in this research believed strongly in fostering student agency, enhancing their ability to use their voices to address injustices. These dialogues were opportunities to publically communicate, as well as to challenge, one's own and others' views about social justice issues relevant to people in the room. The airing of divergent perspectives in role, as in the dramatic deliberation based on the novel *Trupp* (first vignette), seemed to shield student participants from having their own identity positions directly targeted (or having to attach a viewpoint to their identity), while still eliciting conflictual exchange of views. In students' debriefing of the dramatic exercise, they affirmed that value of that conflictual expression in provoking and informing their reflection and learning regarding their own perspectives.

Critical literacy approaches that mobilize drama and conflict dialogue pedagogies can create opportunities for agonistic (constructively critical) political exchanges. In both vignettes described above, the teacher and I tried to create and sustain conditions in which encounters would be critical and respectful (agonistic). The pedagogies described invited students' affective engagement, in part through drama and also through inviting expression of conflicting views about unresolved social justice issues. Clearly, dramatic encounters can be opportunities for meaning-making that challenges oppression: teachers and students can play roles that disrupt the oppression that may emerge.

These vignettes reveal the potential of talk and drama for critical literacy approaches embedded in social justice. Dialogic and divergent out-of-role talk can support the intersubjective and affective exploration of critical questions of social justice—that is, it can engage students' hearts and minds in the learning space. Interweaving drama with dialogue mitigated some of the danger associated with social justice education, by creating spaces for both play and thoughtful exploration of understandings. The young students in Maureen's and Andre's classrooms had opportunities to engage agonistically, affectively, and critically in deconstructing the issues introduced by their very participation in the dramatic and dialogic encounters. What counted as literacy, in these contexts, was broadly defined. As Ladson-Billings (2016) argues, such a characteristic of literacy involves creating opportunities for students to ask their own question and search for their own answers, while engaging in a collective struggle against the status quo. The vignettes analysed in this paper show how drama pedagogy and conflict engagement in critical literacy as an approach to social justice education can go beyond "polish[ing] problems with the shine of attention" (Cahill, 2011, p. 30), to deconstruct these problems and risk disrupting initial conceptions, in order to elicit and provoke invention of responses to deepen understandings in unforeseen ways.

Responses to different texts with Andre's students and in Maureen's classroom were unpredictable learning opportunities. They provoked additional questions that required time to

pursue, in order for students to have the opportunity to rethink and/or challenge oppression. Critical literacy pedagogies embedded in social justice, and students' responses to such pedagogies, illustrate both the risk and the educative potential of conflict in teaching – engagement with unresolvable political conflict while including and acknowledging passion and emotion, to inform action for social change.

Framing critical literacy as a dramatic encounter seems to provide a shape and scaffolding for collective meaning-making—mitigating the risks (to speakers and less dominant peers) of unfettered self expression in the discussion of difficult conflictual questions about continuing injustice. In a moment of complex and real time communication - communication forms such as Twitter, Snapchapt, WhatsApp, Instagram and others forms of social media have create opportunities for even more dramatic encounters. Access to information and multiple perspectives – from more dominant to invariably marginalized – create an even deeper need for young people to engage their literacy in critical ways. New forms of communication are also opportunities for students to *express* their literacy in various ways. We might, as educators be tempted decry the loss of traditional forms of “literacy”, but Gloria Ladson-Billings (2016) reminds us that we might also support students with the multiple forms of literacy created almost daily – and celebrate how youth invent and create language in ways that can potentially disrupt an often unjust status quo.

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