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First Steps toward Third Space

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Some of us may benefit from a day spent sorting and purging shelves and piles of papers in our classrooms to create more space. However, the space addressed here does not require days of dusty labor; instead, it requires that teachers become critical about everyday language and literacy instruction. Rather than moving desks to create writing workshops or comfortable reading areas in your classrooms, the kind of space I wish to explore involves the social spaces we occupy during our time with children. The word “explore” represents the newness of this concept in the field of literacy and language arts. This article will examine possibilities for enacting *third space* pedagogies in a second grade classroom.

Research and theory on third space emphasizes the complex nature of merging students’ sociocultural and linguistic experiences with curriculum (Gutiérrez 148; Moje et al. 41). This kind of learning is not simply a form of lesson planning that ensures respect for diversity or inclusion; rather, learning that is transformative, critical, and transferable across the boundaries of all learning spaces in children’s lives (Gutiérrez and Larson 70). I envision a definition of third space as a way to turn traditional texts, curricula, and our everyday practices into powerful tools that help teachers and students negotiate new understandings about the world we live in.

Within this framework, literacy is defined as a social practice, consisting of institutionalized patterns and power relationships between individuals and groups. As well, literacy practices both in and out of schools are part of larger sociocultural, political, and economic contexts (Lewis 10). In this article, I provide a brief outline of the theoretical

concepts that support these practices followed by several classroom examples that demonstrate the challenges and complexities that teachers may face when working toward a third space pedagogy.

A Framework for Understanding Third Space

Sociocultural and critical perspectives toward language and literacy provide a framework for understanding the concept of third space. Gutiérrez argues that literacy and language arts instruction traditionally rely upon weak definitions of literacy as vertical skill sets; however, when classroom practices stem from more robust definitions, inclusive of students’ culture, history, language, and out-of-school literacies, a third space for learning is created (149). For example, rather than call-and-response instruction on letters and sounds for the sake of building alphabetic and phonemic awareness, a collectively negotiated third space might include a literacy walk in which children explore letters and sounds, words, and signs that signify meaningful language in their social communities (Orellana and Hernández 618). When literacy instruction is limited to skill instruction it often ignores the sociocultural and critical features of literacy development within various learning communities (Gee 22; Lewis 10).

Individuals acquire language and learn literacy in many different settings. How they perceive instruction, texts, and experience their material and social worlds in these settings will vary according to background experiences, their communities, and ways of viewing the world (Gee 59). In order to understand this concept of creating a third space for students, it is essential to understand how deeply our use of language is rooted in social practices, and that these social practices can transform our understandings and use of language in powerful ways (Lewis 180). For example, the use of multicultural literature is a social practice that will guide students to negotiate understandings of themselves and others by reflecting on the cultures and experiences of others. These practices in school may contradict or support family and community practices. One such example is the traditional ways that curriculum has normalized whiteness and power

relationships between Europeans and Native Americans through reenactments of feasts and festivals, rather than both the positive and negative experiences. Teachers can facilitate dialogue and critically engage students with multicultural texts in ways that disrupt traditional beliefs.

McCarthy studied the relationship between literacy instruction, student identity, and power relations in the classroom (15). She found that “the relationships we develop inside and outside the classroom, influenced by culture, class, and gender contribute to the continual process of identity construction” (McCarthy 130; Egan-Robertson 451). Students negotiate understandings of themselves and others, as well as the communities they live in, during their interactions with teachers and texts (Hall and Piazza 40). While much of the research on third space has been conducted with marginalized populations (Gutiérrez 148; Moje et al. 38), I thought it would be worthwhile to explore how it might be enacted in a primarily white rural setting where many of the marginalizing traditions are embedded. How might teachers in these settings work towards the same goals? How might they contribute to new and different ways of interacting critically with texts?

Rural Communities

In my experience, rural communities are independent, generous, and often religious; however, rural populations are also characterized as being socially conservative, ethnocentric, and intolerant (Ayalon 2). The isolated nature of rural settings highlights the importance of creating spaces that compel students to question and challenge traditional views on “others.” There is a need to alter those spaces. While I continue to examine my own privileged role as researcher, advocate for equity, and mentor to teachers, I find that there is challenging and rewarding work to be done in communities that look like me. These are settings where most people are never asked to think critically about privilege, power, or sociocultural issues. Literacy is a social practice that provides opportunities to engage in powerful and critical conversations.

It is important not to characterize rural settings as entirely white or working class, or entirely anything for that matter. There are often children of migrant families, English language learners, and sometimes immigrants from any

number of other countries. Some learners who fall outside of the mainstream are marginalized when they do not identify with textual features, or when their own identities are not valued as part of the reading process (Ladson-Billings 32; Tatum 53). Therefore, reading achievement

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and educational outcomes hinge on issues of inclusiveness of student identities that are rooted in their communities, families, gender roles, and other social realms. Working toward a third space that helps all children negotiate new understandings of themselves and others is the goal.

So, how can teachers and students position themselves to generate an inclusive environment that problematizes their own norms? What might these spaces look like and feel like in a real classroom? How do teachers get from where we are today to a critical understanding of third space regardless of where we work? The following narratives stem from a larger research project, and demonstrate the attempts of one novice teacher striving to work with students toward this end. These scenarios do not provide recipes; however, they demonstrate the complexities of working toward meaningful engagements that acknowledge students’ existing realities, issues of power, identity, and critical literacy. (All names are pseudonyms to protect the identities of students and teachers.)

Making Space for Student Dialogue

Stacey teaches second grade in Pine Valley Elementary School located in a rural Midwestern farming community. Twenty-two of her students are white, one is Latina, and one is Chinese-American. Pine Valley Elementary serves twenty-four percent of their student population free and reduced lunch. Stacey began exploring the use of multicultural literature during shared reading time to engage her students in critical discussions around issues of diversity and equity. She and I collaborated as teaching partners once per week for the entire school year, though

I was a visiting researcher and she was the assigned teacher. We celebrated some successes as well as a few struggles while attempting to engage students' out-of-school literacies and community norms into daily critical literacy practices. Here I will present two key incidents in which Stacey began to create space for students to deconstruct long-standing beliefs about self and others in their community during their language arts block.

Stacey was interested in exploring issues of diversity and class-based inequities found across traditional and multicultural texts about Native Americans during the month of November when many in her district were celebrating Christopher Columbus. During a reading of Kathleen Lacapa's *Less than Half, More than Whole* (illustrated by Michael Lacapa), she facilitated a dialogue about how race and ethnicity influenced the ways in which children see themselves as well as how others see them. The main character in Lacapa's story struggled with his identity because he thought he was not fully white or fully Native American. His friends positioned him as 'less than whole.' The main character learned through discussions with his grandfather that he was indeed more than half of any ethnicity. Something interesting happened during that discussion when one of Stacey's students commented that being American meant being white.

Initially, Stacey felt she would stray from her plans if she pursued this question. She was an avid planner. Nevertheless, something compelled her to make space for this discussion. She posed the question, "So, what does it mean to be white?" One young man responded, "White people look just like me, like the rest of us in here." Stacey sat and waited as if it was the most natural thing to do, and I knew from experience that this was not her typical response. Stacey and I discussed this instructional decision afterward. Her uneasiness with that statement, how it may have made her non-white students feel, and the bias she recognized in that belief was what prompted her to spend time on the discussion. She waited until another child said, "Well, I'm white because I'm German." Students soon began to comment on the fact that not many people have one heritage, and they questioned if it was possible to refer to a person's heritage as "white." Students were taking the lead with critical questions, and only once did Stacey need

to facilitate turns during the discussion.

At this point, students were enacting different roles than I had become accustomed to observing during shared reading time. Once one child assumed a critical stance, the others began to chime in and their discussion became a perfect storm of Native American and European American history from two very different perspectives. I observed that Stacey quite naturally stepped away from the position of power in this discussion, which led students to explore multiple perspectives on the history of Native Americans and the concept of being American. This provided students an opportunity to think about discovery and colonialism in ways that might influence their developing understandings of history for years to come. Stacey was also hoping that perhaps this discussion would broaden students' understandings of each other and the concept of whiteness.

This exchange certainly does not exemplify the crossing of boundaries of different kinds of literacies and identities; however, I would argue that it opened the door to a critical dialogue that will potentially emerge in other contexts in their lives and in the future when they encounter Columbus and the discovery of America from limited vantage points. This exemplifies how students can construct new understandings with each other, and how teachers can facilitate challenging discussions that offer transformative learning that will potentially cross boundaries.

Growing into New Understandings

As the school year progressed, Stacey began to provide more and more opportunities for students to interact with each other around new ideas. She encouraged alternative stances and encouraged students to negotiate different interpretations of texts. My notes and reflections documented a growing sense of confidence and courage to elicit and support critical stances during instruction. While Stacey's text selections were all age and grade level appropriate, her students were able to connect them to critical global issues such as war, immigration, and the Holocaust, even though these would likely be considered too advanced for most second grade classrooms. For example, during a mandated unit that focused on core democratic values, Stacey read aloud Eve Bunting's *How Many Days to America?* This is a story about a family's

escape from violence in their home country and their travels to the US in a small boat. Stacey thought this text would support students' thinking about how immigrants might have felt as they arrived in the US from their foreign country. She chose this text to elicit discussions around diversity and equity. Providing this historical context of immigration helped students to think about family stories. It helped them connect present day immigration issues with the text and their own family histories. Stacey did not intend to address issues around the Mexican border, but since elections were in full swing, her students recognized the connection and raised the issue themselves.

Later in that same unit, she shared Joanne Hoestlandt's *Star of Fear, Star of Hope*, a story of an elderly French woman who remembers her experiences as a child during the Holocaust. Stacey chose this text because she believed it would represent examples of life, liberty, and justice. She read the story without discussion besides the occasional clarifying question. She paused at the end and waited for students to respond. One by one—without prompting, students began to question the inequitable treatment of Jews during World War II. Again, students were beginning to connect fair treatment of others in the present with historical examples they were reading about. When Stacey reflected on this lesson, among others, she said:

Critical literacy opens up the door of the classroom to discuss pertinent issues that involve our students' lives each and every day. Each day is a new opportunity to critique, analyze...and expose the underlying issues present in the texts we interact with, to not just take someone's word for it, but to truly think about what the text means in our lives and how it means different things to different people depending on their perspectives.

Conclusion

During my observations in Stacey's classroom, we often had reflective conversations about how students were interacting with each other around texts. Stacey was very organized and always had each day well planned; nevertheless, I noticed that she gently pulled away from her position of power during the most critical dialogues so

that students began to negotiate the space in which these discussions took place. I have concluded that the concept of creating a third space in the majority of US classrooms will be elusive until we begin to understand how a conscious and purposeful pedagogy centers itself on student thinking and lived experiences that exist outside of our classrooms. Students arrive in our classrooms with strong opinions or beliefs, and in this rural setting, the beliefs are grounded in the dominant culture of power. Creating space for students to problematize and explore concepts they have never considered can transform classrooms into places that change lives or perspectives—or enlarge them—rather than simply deliver lessons to build literacy skills.

Teachers can choose to use their position of power to create a third space that no longer looks and feels like a traditional authoritarian classroom. In these new spaces, students have an important role to play in the negotiation of understandings of ideas, people, and issues. Power relationships between teachers and students can be altered, but from my own experiences, I do not believe this is the norm. McCarthy reminds us, "oppressive practices may occur when teachers assume that students share the same cultural practices they do and impose their scripts on students" (15). I would argue that the same is possible when teachers do share the same cultural practices with their students. They might inadvertently perpetuate these shared cultural practices of privilege, instead of inviting students to reflect on alternative ways of knowing about the world they live in.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that my role in the classroom likely influenced some of Stacey's decisions regardless of how comfortable we became with one another. It is always difficult to be the researcher in another's classroom, and I struggled between various roles as a collaborator, visitor, researcher, and a university professor. I did keep a journal of these tensions, and there were times when I felt very unsure about how to proceed. Do I advocate for more critical literacy practices, or do I defer on particular topics when they were clearly not within her comfort zone. My own theories and beliefs continue to evolve regarding the complexity of exploring these unknown spaces in graduate classes and in elementary classrooms.

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