Kidwatching with a Critical Eye: The Power of Observation and Reflexive Practice

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I was thinking this morning . . . that it’s a struggle to figure out how much do you prod and push them and how much do you just let an issue die if they don’t seem to be going with you . . . after looking at the video from yesterday and the discussions we’ve had so far about the bench outside . . . about how it reminded me of Rosa Parks . . . I think I’ll give it just one more try because some of them asked if she had died. . . . I might pose the question one more time—the comparison of her getting up because of her skin color [to my students being told to get up off the playground bench possibly because of their age] . . . see if that pushes the discussion again or this issue is one that I just need to leave alone. . . . (6/12/2008, reflection journal)

This vignette reflects the tensions I felt while teaching young children during a summer enrichment program in an urban city in the southern United States. It demonstrates how hard it was to observe what I perceived as an injustice—an incident on our playground bench—and discuss it with the children. As we entered an empty playground one day, my students searched for a spot of shade to sit under while eating and resting from play. As other classes came outside, teachers yelled at my students, stating the bench was for adults only. I watched in a state of disbelief and was uncomfortable about how to respond. I wasn’t aware of a rule that only adults could sit on the benches. This event reminded me of what Rosa Parks might have felt when she was told to move from her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus.

Teaching from a critical stance is hard. It was clear to me from my students’ faces as they were told to get off the bench, from the tension I felt inside, and from their emotive responses during our morning meeting that basing curriculum upon observation of what is happening in the lives of students is not easy. My decision to bring this episode to the class, instead of letting it slide, could affect our relationships with each other and with the other teachers. However, I felt that what I had witnessed was important, and that I needed to at least open space for a conversation.

I approached my teaching from a practitioner inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009), curious about the ways young children talk about injustices. I spent my summer learning alongside the children, kidwatching (Owocki & Goodman, 2002), and talking with them about issues they experienced in their lives (Vasquez, 2004; Comber, 2003; Sahni, 2001). In this article, I am using the term “critical” to refer to the body of scholarship on critical inquiry that reads the world from a perspective of deconstructing power, position, and privilege and reconstructing new ways of being together (Vasquez, 2001, 2004; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Kincheloe, 2005).

I am familiar with developmental assumptions that young children cannot or even should not be exposed to a curriculum about social issues; these assumptions draw a romantic ideal of childhood and attempt to shelter children from harsh realities. However, I have witnessed five- and six-year-old children struggling to make sense of inequities in their lives. Children experience injustices and need a place in school to converse and process the world.

In this article I explore how kidwatching with a critical eye helps to make sense of the ways children process and deal with injustices. I write from a reflective practitioner stance to share what I learned by observing myself and my students and how it has changed my frames of interpretation. I discuss how critical observation plays into practitioner research and meshes with reflection and praxis. I hope to illuminate how teachers can become close kidwatchers from a critical stance and use social injustices that children experience and/or witness as a springboard for curriculum.
Critical Whole Language: Kidwatching as the Core

Several educators support the notion that critical inquiry is not a prescribed or prepackaged curriculum, but instead should come from the lives of children (Vasquez, 2004; Comber, 2003). This belief rests on the assumption that children experience injustices, talk about them (Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Heffernan & Lewison, 2005; Skattebol, 2003), and act as agents of change (Comber, Nixon, Ashmore, Loo, & Cook, 2006; Sahni, 2001). Kidwatching, the idea of informed observation, is then necessary for teachers to know what their students are wrestling with in their lives. Kidwatching is the heart of a critical inquiry curriculum, with teachers listening to and observing children in order to bring relevant issues into the official school curriculum.

As a practitioner-researcher, I intentionally looked for specific occurrences of injustices happening to my students and conversations they had about social issues. I listened to their conversations, especially in unofficial school spaces. For example, I overheard two girls, one Caucasian and one African American, discussing their skin color and friendship. They discussed friends during the regular school year who were not their same race and how they would intentionally befriend each other during the summer program. I watched for actions and embodied responses, such as ways students responded to being told to get off the bench on our playground. Observing the body language and what appeared to be silenced voices showed me that some students felt powerless in this situation.

Some criticize whole language theory and its pedagogy for being too individualistic, for having roots in white, middle-class ideologies, for silencing some students, or for teaching that skims the surface of what children are interested in without getting to what is really on their minds (Edelsky, 1999; Jarvis, 1999). By combining whole language theory, specifically a focus on kidwatching, with critical pedagogy, some educators hope to challenge dominant ideologies. Edelsky (1999) has termed this combination critical whole language, where classroom curriculum is grounded in student lives, and classrooms offer a safe place to voice genuine (not merely acceptable) concerns. In such classrooms, curriculum takes a critical stance, and teaching is pro-justice and activist environment oriented. Drawing upon this idea, I attempted to create with my students a critical-inquiry curriculum to help us process the injustices felt on our playground.

The Children and Our Critical Inquiry

I had 27 five- and six-year-old children from various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds in the university-sponsored summer program. Our curriculum, sparked by the incident on our playground, led to examining Rosa Parks’s decision to not surrender her bus seat. The students were interested in why Rosa was asked to get up from her seat and why she was arrested for not doing so. We used Internet resources, children’s literature, and our personal experiences as a way to process the issues. We created an “audit trail” as a way to document our learning (Harste & Vasquez, 1998): we charted our class discussions and posted photocopies of books and Internet sources we read, along with our responses, a timeline, some small-group webs used to write our own class book, and other artifacts from our inquiry journey (see Figure 1).

How Did I Make Observations Even More Critical?

Having time to step back and revisit notes and video and audio recordings afforded me the opportunity to see what I hadn’t noticed while teaching. I looked for incidences in our class interactions of agency, where identities fluctuated and power shifted; for example, students’ discussions about Rosa Parks getting arrested and being jailed. A student spoke up and asked, “Prison or jail?” I responded that they are the same thing. However, one girl interjected, “Prison you stay in there for longer and jail only a little bit.” This agentic move on her part challenged my response and offered a more accurate assessment of jail and prison. This interaction demonstrated how important it is to listen closely, with a critical ear, to children.

I specifically paid attention to the global discourses in our interactions. For example, below is a class conversation about playground rules:

Candace: A playground law. Who decides that law? Who decided that?
Jennie: Um, God.

Jennie: The parents.

Candace: You think the parents did?

Unknown: And God.

Joey: God, God, God, God.

Candace: God decided what?

Unknown Girl: The principal!

Candace: Maybe the principal? We don’t really know where that came from. The law that you have to…

Unknown male: Or city hall! [jumps up, pointing finger up to the ceiling]

Candace: We might need to explore that some more; [turning pages in Rosa Parks’s biography] let’s see what happened.

Henry: City hall?!

Several students: City hall.

Jennie and Joey both articulated that playground laws come from God. I connected this religious interaction with some of the comments parents supplied on questionnaires I sent home. Many of the adults, when asked if they talked with their child about issues such as poverty, race, or homelessness, stated that they did. Many framed these discussions with comments such as, “Some people are not as blessed as we are,” or “We discuss how we are suppose to give to the poor. I always use Jesus as the prime example;” or “We’re all God’s children but some people treat people of different races unfairly.” Many of the responses used God and religion to frame these conversations about social issues. Children bring global discourses with them to the classroom, which was especially evident in the above discussion.

What Did I Discover about Children by Kidwatching?

First, through kidwatching I realized that we read emotions as texts; emotions are an embodied literacy. Traditionally, emotions are viewed as individual and private. However, by closely watching interactions among students, I was able to see that our critical inquiry on segregation was not separated from our using our emotions to make sense of what we read and experienced (Boler, 1999; Micciche, 2007). Micciche’s discussion of emotion as “emerging relationally, in encounters between people, so that emotion takes form between bodies rather than residing in them” (2007, p. 13) resonates with me. When I witnessed other
teachers telling my students to “get off the bench,” I read the children’s emotions through body language, sad faces, and a lack of urgency to move. We read each other as we not only verbalize our emotions but also perform them in interactions with one another (Kuby, 2010).

Second, I learned that even our youngest learners are curious about injustices and have sophisticated, persistent questions with which to process inquiries. For example, when I first made a connection between Rosa Parks and what I witnessed on our playground, my students flooded me with questions about Rosa and why she was arrested, including:

- Is she alive right now?
- Is she still under arrest?
- How long did she live?
- Why was a law created that separated blacks and whites on buses?

Even if we believe in romantic ideals of sheltering young children, they are curious about exploring injustices.

A third insight I learned from kidwatching, which has changed my pedagogy, is that children spontaneously engage in verbal role-play, a type of role-play that through conversation “plays with” perspective taking and various scenarios. Many have written about how drama within a critical inquiry curriculum is a productive way for students to explore multiple perspectives on an issue (Medina & Campano, 2006; Wolf, Edmiston, & Enciso, 1997; Boal, 1993). I discovered the children role-playing as a way to hypothesize “what if” situations and take on various perspectives about segregation. I intentionally encouraged verbal role-play in this conversation between Annie, a Caucasian child, and myself as we discussed whether racial bus segregation is fair.

**Candace:** How would you feel?

**Annie:** ...Hum... bad [hard to understand— maybe “sad”].

**Candace:** You might feel sad to sit in the back. Do you think that’s how they felt back here? [pointing to the book]

**Annie:** [nods yes]

In this exchange Annie asked, “Um... If I was the white people?” This short question is powerful. It demonstrates that at a young age Annie was able to step out of her identity as a white girl and take on multiple perspectives. Annie drew upon verbal role-play and positioned herself in a range of perspectives to help her process.

A fourth lesson I learned from kidwatching was to embrace the fissures—the cracks or unexpected moments in interactions—which many times present themselves as interruptions or off-task comments. During a class conversation about Rosa, Katie, a child whose family identified as African American, interjected with a “one time” story.

**Candace:** How do you think, what do you think happened then? Katie, what do you think happened?

**Katie:** I wanted to tell you. [inaudible, clearing her voice] One time [clearing voice] one time I went with my grandma to see what happened.

**Candace:** What happened. So a white man came and said [pointing at students], “You must get out of your seat and give this seat to someone else.” And she decided not to do it. She was breaking the law there. The law told her she had to. She chose not to. You know what that reminded me of? [slight laughter; more of an exhale]

I was surprised when Katie spoke up, clearing her throat to be heard. Her opening line, “I wanted to tell you,” seemed to be agentic and perhaps persistent. She is a quiet child and could have been trying to find a silent moment in our
conversation to share; she hadn’t been able to get a word into the discussion previously. I didn’t embrace this fissure in our conversation; I didn’t ask her to explain more. Instead, perhaps because I was trying to finish a book about Rosa, I moved on to what I hoped the students would talk about—Rosa breaking the law. Katie felt she had a strong connection to Rosa Parks’s story, but I neglected to foster space for her to explore this more.

As I reflected upon my teaching and rewatched audio/video clips, I saw how productive it was to embrace fissures. In the moments that I followed a child’s fissure, our conversations were fruitful in collaboratively trying to process the topic of segregation. Once I realized this, I intentionally tried to embrace these cracks as spaces of inquiry. Because critical inquiry comes from the lives of children, it is by nature uncertain and full of fissures (Vasquez, 2004; O’Brien, 2001; Comber et al., 2006).

What Place Does Close Observation Play in Practitioner Research?

I could not catch everything while kidwatching. However, I recorded daily events and conversations that I felt were important to think about and, after reviewing the interactions, found nuggets of fascinating discussions. Audio and video recordings were the most helpful resources, since they allowed me to go back and rewatch interactions with children. Unfortunately, not all classroom teachers have the time and resources to dig deeper into audio and video files or written notes. As a graduate student, I recognized the opportunity I had to re-enter the data, allowing me to see different things upon a second look.

Kidwatching with a critical stance isn’t always easy, and many times I wanted another teacher to share what I was witnessing. Even though I didn’t have a colleague in the summer program to talk with about my critical inquiry pedagogy, I did have an educator-friend with whom I discussed conversations I had witnessed, reflecting on what they meant to me, and asking for advice on ways I could use these observations in the curriculum. Thinking about and sharing one’s observations are essential aspects of kidwatching, an interweaving of reflection and praxis. Teachers need others to talk with about their observations—a sounding board for our uncertainties. There were several elements that I needed in order to feel supported in teaching from a critical perspective:

- Space and time to think, reflect, and capture interactions;
- Peers and colleagues with whom to share kidwatching experiences;
- Space to engage in practitioner research questions;
- Time to reflect on preconceived ideas;
- Openness to embrace fissures in the curriculum; and
- An administration that supports flexible planning and co-created curriculum based on students’ lives.

What Did I Learn through Observation of My Students and Myself?

I learned how much my life experiences influenced my teaching and the directions I chose to follow in the curriculum. In conversations about segregation, I noticed memories from my childhood surfacing, which I sometimes only realized upon reflection (Kuby, 2010). The biases I brought to my interpretations and interactions helped shape the curriculum. I found myself in my students, asking similar questions. For example, the powerlessness my students appeared to feel on the playground connected to experiences in my childhood interactions with teachers (Kuby, 2010).

I also realized that what I saw as an injustice might not seem one to someone else. As the springboard for the curriculum, I took my own uncomfortable feelings and what I perceived to be the children’s discomfort as indicated through their actions and facial expressions on the playground. In conversations, I introduced my connection of what happened to them to what I know about Rosa Parks’ experience.

Another possible reading of the playground incident is that, as children, my students should have gotten off the bench to be respectful to their elders. Especially in Southern culture, respecting adults through words and actions is generally taught at a young age. So one could read what happened on the playground as a teacher reminding students to offer their seats to adults. In this case, the inquiry project for the summer could have been to research ways that children show respect. However, based on the tone and
demeanor of the teachers who demanded my students get off the bench, and in response to my own uncomfortable feelings as I witnessed the interaction, I did not feel that going in this direction was truly reflective of what happened. I felt the situation was more about power than respect.

Another possible line of inquiry could have been to pursue questions related to injustices more generally. Using questions such as, “Who decides what is an injustice?” or “How do we know when we’ve experienced an injustice?” would have broadened our topic. This line of inquiry would have expanded our research beyond Rosa and possibly encouraged children to think of injustices in their lives in a way that learning about Rosa didn’t.

Still another line of inquiry would have been to explore what counts as segregation. We talked about how Rosa was segregated and specifically about racial segregation in relation to restaurants, water fountains, and libraries before the laws were changed in the 1960s. In this way, segregation was cast in a negative light during our discussions. We didn’t explore if there are any positive aspects of segregation. For example, people who attend alcohol support groups are segregated from others in society in their meetings for the purpose of recovery; they don’t want “outsiders” or “non-alcoholics” in attendance. Is this an example of “good” segregation? We could have explored questions such as, “Who decides on segregation?” or “What are some positive and negative aspects of segregation?”

I chose the path of connecting what happened to us on the playground to Rosa Parks. I did not expect to spend the whole summer researching Rosa and segregation; however, the persistent questions of my students led me in that direction. I acknowledge this was only one way to take up our experience on the playground and that there were many other ways I could have chosen to respond. I also acknowledge that the playground bench experience was not the only injustice I observed; I heard students talk about others. This playground experience seemed to affect many students in my class, and therefore I felt it warranted further conversation.

Close, critical observation allows teachers to create curricular spaces for critical conversations with young children. The literature on critical inquiry reveals a recurring notion of “creating space” (Albright, Church, Settle, & Vasquez, 1999; Jarvis, 1999; Bauman, 2007), which simply means embracing the experiences and questions students have about injustices and intentionally finding space in the curriculum for exploration and action. Discussions about what “creating spaces” might mean and look like for early childhood classrooms are hard to find and not explicitly stated. In a time when teachers feel pressured with mandates that strain teaching time, a powerful concept discussed by Albright et al. (1999) is that space is already there in our schools, we just need to claim it as teachers. Through close, critical kidwatching, educators are able to co-create spaces with students for critical inquiry. Rosenberg (1997) reminds us that “the process of creating these spaces . . . is as important as the spaces themselves” (p. 88). By listening and noticing what children are wrestling with, and opening “official” curricular spaces, we not only send them messages that we care and want to converse about social issues they experience, but also allow the curriculum to follow their interests in the hopes of embodying social action to create change.

One thing I’ve realized this summer is it’s hard when you get on a topic like this, how do you know how far to go, how far to take it, and how do you know when it’s been exhausted . . . to switch to something else? I think it’s a very fine line of listening to the kids and trying to figure out where are they. How do you know when it’s too much for them? (7/10/2008, reflection journal)

**Works Cited**


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