Weaving Layers of Meaning: 
A Collaborative Exploration of Critical Literacy and Multiliteracies

Farveh Ghafouri, Christine Jackson, Miri Knoll

This collaborative inquiry grew from a seed that was planted during an OISE graduate course. During class Miri shared, in a very honest and personal way, her desire to go deeper into complex issues of race and power with her Grade 3 students. Teaching students that were predominantly from visible minority groups, she was wondering how well she was able to connect with them, how she could use different modalities of teaching to respond and respect her students’ learning styles, and how she could invite critical inquiry into her classroom. Her goal was to act more as a facilitator of the students’ inquires and to step back and allow them more ownership of their own learning.

Christine and Farveh were each sparked by Miri’s questions and wonderings, and the generative process of collaborative teaching and learning was quickly and energetically launched. Inspired by our unique teaching backgrounds and areas of focus: Christine brings an extensive background in arts education and teacher training; Farveh brings her Kindergarten teaching experience and her interest in examining the Ontario Kindergarten Program, and Miri comes to the project with a keen interest in critical literacy pedagogy and multiliteracies and a desire to support her students to become text analysts.

Our three distinct paths merged through our shared commitment to engaging students more fully and democratically in the teaching and learning process through applying critical literacy and multiliteracies theories to teaching practice. We embraced the following definition of critical literacy, drawn from the revised Ontario Arts curriculum (2009), as the foundation of our work together:

Critical literacy is the capacity for a particular type of critical thinking that involves looking beyond the literal meaning of a text to determine what is present and what is missing, in order to analyze and evaluate the text’s complete meaning and the author’s intent. Critical literacy goes beyond conventional critical thinking by focusing on issues related to fairness, equity, and social justice. (p. 53).

We understand that this definition of literacy challenges many traditional practices and insists that we investigate texts deeply, from multiple points of view, inviting students to make connections between their experiences and the experiences reflected in the texts. Finally, we agree that a text is never neutral; all texts represent particular views, and we want to empower students to inquire into and challenge these points of view (Larson & Marsh, 2005; Vasques, 2004).

Our inquiry documents the students’ processes of making meaning of layered texts and complex issues, as well as our own collaborative processes of making meaning of critical literacy and multiliteracy theory. This paper is a weave of our interests, our questions, our understandings, our voices, and the voices of Miri’s students.

Methodology

Data Collection

Christine and Farveh made six visits to Miri’s classroom. Four sessions were interactive with the students and two sessions were for planning. In addition, Miri engaged the students in extension lessons between the sessions. The main body of our data was collected throughout
these visits. Additional data emerged through our ongoing electronic conferencing and our
informal talks through phone calls, during our course class, or at our homes. Our data was
collected in a variety of modes and includes observing students, self-reflections, emails, digital
photos and videos, students’ journals, transcriptions, personal notes, and some informal
conversations with the students. Our dialogues and conversations were the primary means to
design, conduct, and make meaning of our data. In this paper, we will highlight three of our visits
that yielded interesting student discussions and teacher reflections.

Participants
This critical literacy inquiry took place in a mid-sized, urban elementary school in
Toronto, in a class of 26 grade 3 students. Most of the students are Canadian-born, however, their
ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are quite diverse. Seven students are on Individual Education
Plans (IEPs) for various academic and/or behavioural reasons.

The Learning Experiences
Multiliteracies, the expansion of literacy to include a variety of sign-making modes, equip
students with a broader range of tools for making meaning and critically analysing texts (Anstey
& Bull, 2006). For the purposes of our inquiry, we are interested in looking at how using the
languages of movement, dramatic expression and visual representation, can support students’
capacity to both make meaning and represent meaning.

Read-Alouds: Making Connection through Picture Books
This inquiry was sparked by rich classroom discussions after a read-aloud of Martin’s Big
Words. Our first learning engagement that we will share introduced students to the Q-chart (see
Appendix A) by revisiting Martin’s Big Words (Rappaport, 2001). The book was re-read and
students were invited to think of and ask questions before, during, and after the read-aloud. We
each had different roles: Miri read the story while Christine transcribed student questions on
sticky notes and Farveh transcribed the discussion. Once the Q-chart was explained, we
organized the student questions into the four quadrants of the chart, ranging from low to higher-
level thinking.

As an extension to the read-aloud of Martin’s Big Words, students were read another
story: Rosa (Giovanni, 2005). After this read-aloud, they created a flip book which identified the
main character, the problem in the story and the solution. Students were quite interested in the
book, despite some of the challenging language. They were able to recognize that racism was the
problem and that Rosa Parks was a vehicle to ending segregation. This prompted another
exploration, in role. Christine assumed the role of Rosa Parks and invited the students ask her
questions about her experience. Role playing was a new modality of learning for the students,
and while most students fully accepted Christine in the role of Rosa Parks fully, one student
seemed to find it somewhat questionable. After the role play, Christine followed up with her:

Teacher: How did it feel for you when I, a white person, was pretending to be Rosa Parks,
a black woman?
Student: Confusing.
Teacher: Can you say more about how it was confusing?
Student: You’re white and I wasn’t sure if you were refusing to give a black person a seat.
That wouldn’t be right.
Teacher: I see. What would have made it less confusing?
Student: Not sure.
Teacher: Would it be better if a black person was in role as Rosa Parks?
Student: Maybe

Teacher: Or what if I sat beside the chair to speak, and we let our imaginations fill in the chair with our mental picture of Rosa Parks. Do you think that might be better?
Student: Maybe, or it might be confusing with no one in the chair.

This experience demonstrates, in a small way, how embracing another modality – that of drama – invited the students to investigate multiple points of view, but also to critically inquire into issues of voice and representation in drama. The students’ questioning of Christine’s right to play the role and assume the voice of Rosa Parks was welcomed, honoured and considered in the context of a critical literacy classroom.

Up to this point in our inquiry, Miri noted that her students have asked many important questions: Did anyone bring food for the people who were marching? How can only love drive out hate? Couldn't they be beaten and killed if they kept protesting? We find ourselves wondering how and when to address student questions. We have much to debrief and discuss.

In an interview with Larson and Marsh (2005), Barbara Comber explained that once critical literacy pedagogy is implemented in the classroom “conversations between learners and between learners and teachers” change (p.63). We are noticing how the students are beginning to make connections to their own experiences, other texts, and the world outside their lived experiences. For example, one student drew a parallel between our classroom conversations and the upcoming Afrocentric school in the Toronto District School Board – a current and very controversial issue in the media. He [a Black student] asked: “If I went to that school, could you still be my teacher?” Most importantly, however, we observed that students are beginning to
make connections with each other. Another Black student commented, “So my best friend and I
can’t go to that school together,” because her friend is white.

**Read-Aloud: Making Connections through Multimodal Exploration and Representation**

We began to wonder how we could bring the students’ growing awareness of equity
issues closer to their day-to-day interactions with one another. Our planning brought us to
another picture book, *Don’t Laugh At Me* (Seskin & Shamblin, 2002), which would allow us to
investigate the concepts of inclusion and exclusion with the students.

In the language curriculum, students were learning about the elements of a narrative text,
including: plot, characters, problem and solution. Before reading *Don’t Laugh At Me*, we looked
at the cover and invited the students to predict what the problem in the story might be. We then
read the picture book and welcomed student observations and comments during the read-aloud.
We listened deeply to the thinking behind their questions, honouring their responses, allowing
think-time, and asked probing questions to engage actively with the text. In the discussion
following the read-aloud, one student located a particular page that interested her. It was an
illustration of a homeless man.

“See”, she said.

This prompted another student to say, “It’s almost the same as segregation”.

Another student chimed in, “Yeah – the homeless man, the kid with braces, the person in
the wheelchair – they’re all picked on.”

Another student added: “It’s kind of like Rosa Parks.”

And another student remarked: “That’s racism. Being laughed at because of how you look.”

This interaction reflects the collective work of connecting texts to text
(intertextuality) and scaffolding, which are often deemed the domain of the teacher. This is
an instance of power sharing when the classroom teacher introduces strong texts to the
students and provides them with lengthy time and opportunities to ask questions, discuss the
possible answers, and experience being collaborators. We have begun to expose the students
to a new, more critical way of reading and thinking. Miri’s comfort with her role as a
facilitator allowed for unexpected curriculum and learning to happen. In the above example,
the students initiated a conversation and then helped each other to make meaningful textual
connections.

We introduced and further explored the concepts of inclusion and exclusion through
three different modalities in three small groups. We all agreed that the students would
benefit from the opportunity to work in different groupings and in different modalities. At
this stage, Christine’s expertise as the program coordinator of the Arts for the Toronto
District School Board and specifically her background in drama helped us to take our inquiry
to another level. She proposed that we divide the students into three groups to represent the
concepts of inclusion and exclusion in different ways: one group created a visual
representation on paper, the second group devised a tableau – a visual representation through
sculpted bodies in relationship to each other, and the third group composed a poem and
translated the words into movement phrases.
In our follow-up teacher-talk, Miri communicated her enthusiasm for how well the students engaged in the tableau activity. Miri noted that a fair amount of teacher direction was required, because it was their first experience with this form of representation. However, the group formulated a shared understanding and negotiated an effective depiction of inclusion and exclusion. They were proud of their work. Farveh allowed her group to draw images that represented inclusion and exclusion. She noticed that there was a calm that descended as the students sprawled on the floor around the mural paper and settled into their drawing. They talked about the words they had brainstormed, helped each other with some spelling, and enjoyed the freedom of drawing, coloring and writing whatever lived in their imaginations. The movement group found the task quite challenging initially. However, once they brainstormed some inclusion words, were able to body-storm them together, translating each word into a physical acting or gesture. With some teacher direction, they were able to develop a short simple sequence of movements to create our inclusion dance.

In this learning experience, the adults served as leaders and facilitators, but shared the leadership with the students. The learning was co-constructed through participation with others and the instruction emphasized process, not product. In particular, the students engaged in the practices of text participation, production, and analysis (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Text participation was encouraged by engaging the students, both physically and cognitively, to interpret and represent the meaning of the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. They mapped their personal stories and experiences onto the experiences represented in the picture books that we had read, and that propelled them into the production of new texts in new forms such as drawings, tableaux, poems, movement phrases. The literacy practice of analysis is evident in their probing questions and their negotiation of how to express their ideas. All together, students’ participation with, and analysis and interrogation of the three “touchstone texts” (Calkins, 1994) Martin’s Big Words, Rosa and Don’t Laugh at Me, informed their production of three new texts: a tableau, a moving poem and a mural.
Through this experience, we see that a multiliteracies, multi-modal approach supports the critical literacy pedagogy by opening up the texts for scrutiny and inviting student participation in the transformation and production of new texts that incorporate their understandings and perspectives.

**Teachers: Using the Documentation Board to Make Learning Visible**

At this stage of our inquiry, we raised more questions. We were wondering how to make visible the rich conversations and learning that had transpired thus far. Retracing the inquiry, the thinking, and the dialogue is not easy. Inspired by the pedagogical documentation in Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998) schools as well as Vasquez’ (2004) description of her audit trail, Farveh suggested that we create a documentation board of what we had done and learned, and post it for the students to revisit and reflect upon. Our goal was to refresh our minds about the questions that the students and we had, the points that we raised, and the things that we accomplished together with the students. We wanted to invite the students to take ownership of their questions and help us to see what might be the next step in our inquiry.

Through our documentation, we were hoping to leave traces of the ways students learn, to make visible the culture of our classroom, and to preserve the most interesting and advanced moments of teachers’ professional growth. Documentation can create a common ground for students and teachers in which comparison of ideas and discussions can be generated. It is a procedure that we hope to support our educational processes and influence the quality of relationships among and between our teachers, students, and families. Our purpose in documenting our work with the students was to offer them an opportunity to revisit some of their “big” ideas and questions and seeks possible answers for their lingering questions.

The process of designing and organizing the document board was not easy at all. Many of the students’ words and artifacts were powerful and very meaningful to us, but the documentation
board was supposed to be a representation of what had happened and we had to choose what to include. Finally, we organized the documentation chronologically and included some of the students’ words and dialogues, their questions and concerns, their pictures, sample of their artifacts, clips from newspapers, and copies of the cover of the books that we read together. Our group work at this point was very dynamic; it was a circular questioning and dialogue process; agreeing and disagreeing; and collectively constructing knowledge and understanding.

**Students: Interacting with the Documentation Board to Reflect on their Own Learning**

Students first approached the documentation board very enthusiastically. They were excited to see their journals, words, and works displayed on the board. We invited four students to closely examine the board and make the possible connections between the different learning experiences and the different texts we had explored. Miri was interacting with her students while Christine transcribed the discussion and Farveh documented using videos and photography. The following is a sample of these four students’ conversations.

Laura: This goes with this, because it shows angry, so it goes there (points to exclusion).
Sam: Yeah, so these are connected, and this is connected and this is connected (points to the covers of the three books they had read).
Sam: I know how to make a connection. This should be a timeline – starts and finishes all the way down there.
Miri: Good idea using your words. How can we show these connections?
Sam: Use a white line (traces it with his finger, all the way).
Laura: A timeline.
Miri: A timeline has dates.

Students then talked about what materials to use and how to draw lines to show the connections between the different parts.

Sam: What happened when people kept protesting? What happened when Rosa Parks wouldn’t give up her seat? So it’s connected. It makes sense.

Miri draws lines as per the students’ suggestions, to show how the students’ inquiry started, unfolded, and continued.

Michel: Segregation in 3 connects to Martin Luther King in 2.
Miri: You’re right.
Tina: I can’t wait to do more.
They all stand back to look before leaving the class.

The above example shows that students were very engaged and keen to revisit the work that they had done with their class. Their comments show that they clearly remembered the things that they had said and done and were able to make connections between different parts of the documentation. We believe working in a small group gave the students lots of opportunities for talking, questioning, and building on each other’s comments. They were repeating some of their initial questions but also offering some new questions; they were excited to continue their project.

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1 All students’ names are pseudonyms.
Conclusions and Implications for Teachers and Research

Our interactions with the students, our teacher talk, and our studies of critical literacy theory, lead us to believe that critical literacy pedagogy changes the ways that students think. We further conclude that having a multiliteracy approach is essential to critical literacy pedagogy, because it expands the repertoire of tools and materials the students can use to think with. Kress (1997) explains that when we expand “what is at hand” to the students – the resources available to them to make meaning – we open up pathways into literacy and what he calls the “new communicational landscape”. In this new communicational landscape, we observe the students beginning to make connections to their own experiences, other texts, and the world. We also celebrate the connections they are making with each other and the connections that we, the teachers, have made with them and with each other.

We together with our students have learned to collaborate at different levels, to listen, to question, and to negotiate. We have learning that to build a learning community we need to trust each other and to dialogue. We experienced the joy of learning.

Our inquiry generated many important questions. Some of our lingering questions are related to the concept of critical inquiry and the presence of multiliteracies in our classroom. We would like to further investigate how to move students’ critical thinking toward action. How can the classroom teacher shift to the role of facilitator of the students’ inquiries, and accommodate the students’ different burning questions? Can these young students continue to develop a critical awareness of injustice and inequality in the world, whilst they themselves become more caring and inclusive as a community?

One main challenge is the lack of resources, especially human resources. Throughout this inquiry, we learned from each other’s experiences how to plan and conduct cooperative research. Our project would not have been possible without each of us being fully committed to ongoing collaboration. We strongly suggest that teachers consider team teaching, group work, and ongoing dialogue with their colleagues, perhaps in the context of professional learning communities.

We read many books, looked at newspapers, and listened to songs with the students throughout our project. (Appendix B provides a list of children’s literature organized by social justice/equity themes for arts explorations.) We understood that students would become more engaged in a text if it was meaningful and relevant to them. We recommend that teachers consider including a variety of texts in their practice. In the reference section, teachers can find some suggestions for a variety of texts that they may use to invite multiliteracies and critical literacies into their classroom.
References
Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *The arts curriculum*. Toronto:

Authors
Farveh Ghafouri is an early childhood educator currently holding three full time jobs: writing her doctoral comprehensive exam at OISE/UT, cooking at home for her family, and play partnering her toddler daughter!

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Miri Knoll is a grade 3 teacher with the Toronto District School Board, and a part-time graduate student in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE/UT.
### Appendix A

#### Q-Chart Template

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<th>Did</th>
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### Appendix B

**Children’s Literature: Social Justice/Equity Themes for Arts Exploration**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drama &amp; Social Justice Picture Books</th>
<th>Novels</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dance- Jennifer Donohue Zakkai</strong></td>
<td><strong>Slakes Limbo</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Troon Harrison Zhong-Yang Huang</strong></td>
<td><strong>Felice Holman</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Streets are Free – Kurusa/Monika Doppert</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dennis Wyneth</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Courage to Fly</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sold</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Someone Beautiful-Sharon Dennis Wyneth</strong></td>
<td><strong>Patricia McCormick</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Keeping the peace David Booth</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Woman who outshone the sun Alejandro Cruz Martinez</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The Village that Vanished Ann Grifalconi</strong></td>
<td><strong>Just some stuff I wrote William Bell</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Varmints – Helen Ward March Craste</strong></td>
<td><strong>Stargirl</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Henry’s Freedom Box Ellen Levine/Kadir Nelson</strong></td>
<td><strong>Jerry Spinelli</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Wolves in the Street Margaret Wild Anne Spudvitas</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The Arrival – Shaun Tan</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Freak</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Trupp Janell Canon</strong></td>
<td><strong>Carol Matas</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Feathers and Fools Mem Fox/Nicholas Wilton</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Woman Who Outshone the Sun Alejandro Cruz Martinez</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Who was the woman who wore the hat? – Nancy Patz</strong></td>
<td><strong>Listen to the Wind Greg Mortenson</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Somewhere Today Shelley Moore Thomas Eric Futran</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Encounter – Jane Yolen</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Erika’s Story – Ruth Vander Zee/Robert Innocenti</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Tales from outer suburbia Shaun Tan</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The Eagle’s Gift Rafe Martin/Tatsuro Kiuchi</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Gleam and Flow Peter Sylvada</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Remember the bridge Carole Boston Weatherford</strong></td>
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