Critical Inquiry in Early Childhood Education: A Teacher’s Exploration

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When I finished reading an interesting article called “Being Across Homes” by Olga Hubbard (Teachers College Record 2011), and I sat down to write this brief introduction to Candace Kuby’s wonderful piece on critical inquiry, I thought about the powerful connections between the two. Hubbard frames her inquiry as “How is our sense of self influenced by the place where we live? And what happens when our lives take place in two different homes, two cultures?” This is essentially the focus of Kuby’s piece, as she examines the social, educational, political, and cultural implications of one small incident at a school site where she worked one summer. Observant and perceptive, Kuby used this incident to embark on a personally and professionally meaningful curricular and inquiry journey with her young students, examining critical topics of social justice and power and voice for both children and adults. Kuby’s project echoes Hubbard’s in powerful ways—showing the power of teacher research and narrative for helping us to feel more at home in the places where we live, work, and learn. As Kuby shows us, it is only in this journey do we build and strengthen a sense of self as teachers, children, families, community members.

—Daniel Meier

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We were less than a week into our summer program when the playground incident occurred. As some of my children headed for the bench under the shade of the tree to eat their snack, a few teachers admonished them not to sit on the playground benches—those were only for teachers. I watched in a state of disbelief, uncomfortable with how to respond to this demand. I was not aware of such a rule. Perhaps the teachers had a similar rule at their own schools and assumed that children were similarly restricted here as well. I was not sure how to approach these adults as I too felt a power differential—they were older than me and seemed to have a connection among themselves. I sensed an injustice in their demands, but was not able to muster the courage to defend the children’s right to sit there.

As an early childhood teacher, I believed that young children could discuss injustices and consider multiple viewpoints. However, this episode, which occurred when I was working with 5- and 6-year-olds in a summer program, made me more carefully investigate what critical inquiry looks like in early childhood. I was curious to know more about the personal and professional process of forming curriculum based on children’s experiences with injustice. In this teacher research study, I examine critical inquiry with young children. Critical inquiry as an approach to teaching gives children curricular space to explore inequities in their lives and hopefully find ways to create social change.

The process of critical inquiry helps children in uncovering social injustices, examining social and political realities, and not accepting prevailing conditions unthinkingly and without question (Comber & Simpson 2001; Kincheloe 2005). It is related to the way power, position, and privilege plays out in the relationships children have with peers, teachers, and other adults. Descriptions of this approach range from reading books about social issues to children with the intention of sparking dialogue to teachers observing children and using questions and issues from local communities to guide inquiry (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys 2002; Vasquez 2004). It needn’t be as prescribed as reading “social issue” books and then asking questions, or doing a unit on a particular issue. Like many terms and approaches to teaching, practices that often originate as situated and specific to a particular context become defined too narrowly as a set of steps to implement or a particular set of questions. However, there is no “right” or “set” way to teach critical inquiry. Critical inquiry can happen in children’s everyday lives and relationships.

Scholarship on critical inquiry in schools has traditionally been limited to upper elementary and secondary classrooms (e.g., Morrell 2004). However, recent work by early childhood educators demonstrates that young children are curious about power structures and question unfairness (e.g., Comber 2003; Goss 2009). These authors demonstrate how teachers can take questions and experiences from the lives...
of young children as the springboard for critical inquiry. I drew upon their work and wondered—Is there something different about engaging young children in critical inquiry rather than older children or adults?

Educators are beginning to articulate how children’s relationships with peers and adults shape critical inquiry with young children (O’Brien 2001; Sahni 2001). As a teacher researcher, Sahni’s work with second graders in India resonated with me. She critiques the views of “traditional” critical theorists (e.g., Freire, Giroux) in relation to early childhood education. Sahni states that critical theorists define power and empowerment in broad social and political terms, which usually look at structures from a macro perspective; men usually have power over these large structures, while women and children often do not have direct control. “Viewed from the perspective of young children, [critical] literacy is not for social and political revolution or national development; it is for people to use in relation to each other” (2001, 25).

She believes pushing children to act socially on larger, global scales is not as valuable as using such an approach with adults because children inhabit “peopled worlds” and not “structural worlds.” Sahni believes that the immediate concerns of children are relational to those directly around them and that curriculum should be formed in response to relationships. O’Brien claims the context and relationship between teachers and children are crucial for critical teaching; therefore, a critical inquiry curriculum is relational by nature (2001). A critical inquiry approach to teaching not only positively supports relationships among children, but also relationships among teaching colleagues and practices within institutions like schools.

According to Sahni, social action is not just about large-scale group projects, but also about the more subtle, personal changes experienced as a result of a critical inquiry. As Sahni writes, social action takes place in the imagined possibilities of children’s creative expression and new ways of being in relationship to others (2001). As Lewis, Enciso, and Moje posit, social action “is about kids performing their identities moment-to-moment, shifting and destabilizing classroom power relations. . . . Social action is performative” (2007, 7).

Literature on critical inquiry suggests the notion of “creating space”—a safe place in the curriculum for children to talk about experiences that make them uncomfortable (Jarvis 1999; Bauman 2007). This approach advocates children’s ability to adopt multiple perspectives related to the injustices explored (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys 2002). For both the children and myself to think together and communally from other
viewpoints, I needed to create a space for us to take risks in dialoguing about difficult topics.

Setting and catalyst for the critical inquiry

I conducted this study while teaching in a summer enrichment program in a large, urban city in the southern United States where children learned through “hands on/minds on” experiences. The program was affiliated with a local university and also used as a practicum site for educators seeking their master’s degree. My responsibility was to provide learning engagements for relatively affluent 6-year-olds and a few 5-year-olds in reading, writing, math, arts, science, and social studies. Since there was only one classroom for each age group, traditionally teachers did not plan curriculum together. The children were from different ethnic groups, (including Caucasian, African American, biracial, Asian, and Indian) and came from financially stable families. The other teachers, whom I did not know before the summer, came from multiple districts in the surrounding communities and had several years of teaching experience and master’s degrees. I approached teaching from a practitioner inquiry stance (e.g., teacher as researcher), which is a framework for educators to research specific questions related to their teaching practices and children’s learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009).

When the playground bench incident occurred, the children’s embodied actions acknowledged their sense of injustice: they appealed to me for help through their silence, stares in my direction, and body language as they took their time to sluggishly remove their snacks from the bench and relocate. I could sense they did not agree with the teachers’ demands, but were not sure how to articulate their feelings, perhaps because of the dominant school discourse that children should obey teachers without question.

Critical inquiry unfolding

I decided to create the time and space where the children were comfortable enough to discuss what had happened. I felt that if I gave the children the opportunity to build a trusting relationship with me, that perhaps we could eventually dialogue about what had happened.

Reflecting later on the events of the day, I thought about what Rosa Parks might have felt when she was told to move from her seat on the bus in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. I thought the children might have prior experiences discussing Rosa Parks at school or during visits to a nearby civil rights museum. I decided to introduce Parks as a way to have the children discuss power relationships and think more deeply on issues of fairness.

I am a Caucasian southerner and realize one might view connecting Parks to our playground experience as minimizing the struggle and oppression of African Americans. I do not equate Rosa Parks’s resistance with the children’s bench incident. The struggle for civil rights was of course about much more than where to sit on a bus, and
Parks’s decision not to move was part of a larger social movement. The children and I discussed how her actions were not a random choice made one day because she was tired, but a planned response as part of her work resisting racial segregation and promoting equal rights for African Americans and other people of color. I perceived the playground incident and Parks’s experience as similar in that two groups of people felt dominated and without voice in a particular situation. (Looking back, I also understand that this connection could have been too large a leap to expect young children to make, considering their lack of background knowledge on the civil rights movement.) I also felt powerless on the playground, as I did not feel I had a voice to challenge the other teachers’ demands. The children began asking questions about Rosa Parks, which shifted our curriculum toward exploring racial segregation in the United States in culturally responsive ways (e.g., Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2006; Kuby 2010, 2011a, 2011b).

The children asked if Parks was still alive and in jail, and for more information about the bus boycott. It was not my intent for the critical inquiry to pursue Parks and racial bus segregation; my intent was to create a space for dialogue around the playground bench situation. However, as
I reflected on the children’s questions I noticed a pattern emerging. The children were unaware of the history of racial segregation in the life of their community and wanted to know more about how a law could be created to separate people.

**Data collection and analysis**

I collected data during planned and incidental classroom interactions through video and audio recordings, photography, children’s artifacts, lesson plans, parent newsletters and questionnaires, and a teaching journal to help understand my ponderings about critical inquiry in early childhood. Based on examples I had studied, I introduced an audit trail as an excellent way to capture the process of research and inquiry with children and document our learning (Vasquez 2004). This tool allowed us to capture our initial questions and document the journey of the critical inquiry, including the resources we drew upon to process our thinking. As a function of the audit trail, we created a “learning wall,” composed of questions and notes from class discussions, photocopied book covers, responses to texts and incidents, and a timeline on segregation events (see image above).

A feature of an audit trail is its uncertainty, not knowing where it will go or what it will look like at the end. For example, when we began I didn’t envision a timeline on segregation. However, as I listened to children’s questions about segregation I sensed they felt these events happened long ago (and could never happen again), and I decided to use a timeline to help children...
orient themselves in relation to these historical events.

While teaching, I listened at night to recordings of classroom interactions and reread my notes to help plan for the following day’s learning engagements. After the summer was over, I spent a significant amount of time after the program ended analyzing the data more closely for aspects of emotions and relationships in critical inquiry teaching and learning. I created a new analytical framework called CPAE (critical performative analysis of emotions) to understand emotions within critical literacy, and used three theoretical positions to ask questions of the data: sociocultural, performative aspects of narrative theory, and rhizomatic theory. (For more information, see Kuby 2010).

Below are three areas of insights I gained from analyzing the data and examining ways critical inquiry in the early childhood years can promote strong social relationships.

**Insights gained: Curricular and critical inquiry decisions**

In schools, relationships between teachers, children, families, other educators, and the curriculum are not neutral but full of decisions and possible directions. As I taught, I discovered that a social justice curriculum can be appropriate for young children, that I must be careful about using language when discussing injustice, and that social action can be part of relationships in the early childhood years. I understood critical inquiry teaching as using events and questions from children’s lives as the springboard for curriculum, while simultaneously introducing other possible ways of seeing and being in the world—a co-creating process I found more difficult than I imagined. The following is a discussion of the way this critical inquiry proceeded and my own journey through it.

**Social justice as an appropriate topic**

I wrestled with what I felt was appropriate for young children and what parents, other teachers, and observing university practicum students would think of my choice to teach from a critical position. My reflective journal captured the tension of working among other educators, whom I could not be sure understood or agreed with my teaching practices (all names are pseudonyms).

**June 13:** Yesterday I had a conversation with my aide [Caucasian] about the reason I had brought up the discussion about the playground. She asked, “Is it because older kids had asked the kids to get off the bench?” I told her no, that it was teachers who had done that. She connected it to when she was a child—a lady broke in line in front of her and her mom wanted her to stick up for herself. I’ve been dealing with this dilemma of having other adults in the room and not being sure how they feel about me bringing up this topic [the playground bench] with the kids and if they understand the purpose behind it.

But a real interesting thing happened this morning. Ellie and Annie [Caucasian] came into the room first and we had a

**Henry believed as long as people had their own seat it was fair, no matter if it was in the front or back of the bus.**
few minutes by ourselves. Since Annie had been the one who asked me if Rosa Parks had died or not, I showed her how I had printed off the Internet some information about her and the date of her death. We talked for a few minutes about how many years it had been since she had died. Then she said she still did not understand why white people would forbid African Americans from sitting where they wanted on a bus. She wanted to know if we could bring this inquiry up to the class and discuss it. I’m thinking maybe on Monday to read a picture book about forbidding people to have library cards and maybe the history of some other things like the right to vote. Henry thinks that these things happened a really long time ago. Maybe that’s something else I can bring up—that this occurred during the time his parents (or grandparents) were alive. So they can get a sense that it wasn’t a very, very long time ago, that it is still very real.

Feeling closely observed by university students and not completely sure what the program aides thought about my curricular decisions contributed to my sense of uncertainty. The decision to use an experience on our playground directly related to other teachers was risky. I had to ponder the consequences (for me and the children) of bringing the playground incident into the official curriculum. I also struggled with how the curriculum might progress regarding the topic of racial segregation. What if the children asked questions I was not comfortable discussing?

Teaching from a critical inquiry stance with any age group of children can feel perilous. However, I sensed it might be more difficult with children in early childhood, especially ones from relatively affluent families. The dominant discourse of developmentally appropriate practice circulated in my mind as I considered teaching decisions. Who decides what is appropriate for the children in my classroom, especially when their questions come from a lived experience like a playground event? Is it not appropriate to offer space to wrestle with difficult topics like racial segregation? Without this space, do we run the risk of perpetuating the romantic ideal of being a color-blind society, or of history repeating itself due to younger generations’ lack of knowledge?

Co-creating curriculum

Early childhood literature encourages teachers to co-create curriculum with children, based on their interests (Fisher 1998; Helm & Katz 2001). While I embraced this, I found it difficult to do from a critical stance. How
much power should a teacher have in introducing questions and scenarios for children to ponder and push their thinking? If a teacher does not introduce alternate perspectives, does she run the risk of reproducing dominant beliefs? The two journal entries below demonstrate the tensions I felt.

June 19: Today we looked at a Rosa Parks’s biography and Richard Wright’s Library Card and used a chart to write down our thinking about the problems in each. I’m trying to pull the students back to Henry’s point about this happening a long time ago and thinking about things that have happened to them more recently. How things are still unfair and unjust in the world right now—I’m wondering if they could be in small groups and maybe draw or write something unfair that they’ve seen. Maybe not to themselves but to other people and maybe use those as discussion points of things that happen currently. Maybe I should bring in newspapers even, as a way to help them think about current things that are unjust.

June 27: I’m thinking of reading Henry’s Freedom Box or This is the Dream as a way to talk about a more historical perspective—of what things happened in the past but also talking about today. What is the hope? What do we hope for when we talk about issues of racism? And then next week I’ll have to see maybe if we should explore other issues of fairness that are happening to us right now. It just feels like I need more time because they just keep asking questions and we keep moving forward with it. We’ll have to see what comes of our last week together.

This self-discourse depicts constant negotiation through use of modal phrases such as “maybe,” “I’m wondering,” and “we’ll have to see.” Modal phrases, using hedging words, indicate uncertainty. By writing, I explored possibilities for the curriculum. Yet at the same time, I struggled with how to follow the children’s questions and introduce them to new topics, ideas, and historical events.

Relations through language
In my talk with the children I was inconsistent in “labeling” groups of people (e.g., blacks and whites on the bus with Parks). I wondered why I simplified racism through language, and the effect this had on our inquiry.

Language to downplay hate. In this class discussion about the incident on our playground, I made a connection to Parks’s experience.

Candace: I was thinking about how people were asking you to get up and lose your seat [on the bench]. And, it reminded me of another lady who was on a bus one time and she was asked to get up out of her seat and move. Have you ever heard of someone who had to get out of their seat on a bus and move?

Several children: No.

Children’s Books Used for Critical Inquiry
Henry: Yes I have before. Well, my mom said, um, I have to get up, out of the seat and then I can, I can sit on my mom’s lap.

Candace: Okay, so maybe if there are lots of people who want to sit down, you, because you are small enough, could sit in your mom’s lap and allow someone else to have a seat?

I found myself using nicer language to talk about what happened to Parks, softening the horrific treatment of African Americans. For instance, I said Parks was “asked” to get out of her seat. Was she really “asked”? There was a law behind the actions of the bus driver and police officers; legally it wasn’t really a choice. This is one example of hedging words with children and the difficulty in choosing language to discuss injustices. Perhaps at some level I wanted to shelter children (and even myself) from the atrocities of racial segregation, even though I firmly believed discussions such as these were important.

The misunderstanding of race = color. In the example below, we were problem-solving rules that would be fair to all people on buses.

Candace: But why did they do it [create a law for racial bus segregation] in the first place?

Henry: But guess what . . . If the bus driver let the black people sit in the front and the white people sit in the middle of the bus and the brown people sit um, like um, at the back of the bus that would be fair too.

Candace: Why would that be fair?

Henry: Because they would each have their own seat.

Katie: Um, well, at my school when we go on a field trip our class always goes in the middle.

Candace: So your whole class sits in one place together, it doesn’t matter what color your skin is, right?

Katie: (nods head yes)

The students continued to wrestle with the concept of fairness. Henry complicated our discussion by verbalizing a rule for not just two groups of people, but three: black, white, and brown. As indicated, Henry believed as long as people had their own seat it was fair, no matter if it was in the front or back of the bus. I hesitated to express my disagreement, afraid it might shut down our conversation; instead, I nodded my head slowly in acknowledgment. The language of “black, brown, and white” homogenizes groups of people. I wrestled with how to make space available to discuss injustices such as segregation without simplifying the historical experiences of various groups of people, and struggled with addressing race-based categorization and the idea that race equals skin color.

New vocabulary. I also struggled with vocabulary unfamiliar to the children and how to discuss new terms, such as slavery. They wanted to know more about the historical context, so I read Henry’s Freedom Box as a way to introduce the history of slavery and racial segregation.

July 1: Today I read Henry’s Freedom Box and I also showed them a very simple timeline so they could see that Henry’s Freedom Box happened a long time ago and they could see where Rosa Parks fell in place . . . I think that some of them were kind of getting it but I think it was definitely a difficult topic, lots of new words like “master” and “slave.” They didn’t quite understand, but some of them knew what they meant and it was helpful.
When dialoguing with children on complex issues such as racial segregation, how do we speak directly about difficult topics such as race and slavery without oversimplifying? Finding vocabulary that young children understand and yet doesn’t maintain oppression and misunderstandings is tricky (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010). New concepts and terms will inevitably surface, and may not be easy to dialogue about with children. However, using accurate terms is necessary for children to understand multiple viewpoints and possible reasons for historical injustices.

Social action as embodied: Relationships over space/time

Critical inquiry calls for social action. Early on, I understood social action to mean a tangible, visible product or outcome of a critical investigation, such as a petition, drama, art presentation, or public speech. However, I began to question what social action means in early childhood. Could it be more about social transformation between people? Are there more subtle, even personal, forms of social action?

Social action through painting. The children used painting as a way to respond to our discussions. On the last day of the program, Logan and I discussed his painting based on the playground bench experience (see image on p. 12—the left side illustrates the unfair situation, the right side shows how he might have responded differently). Even though Logan did not have a conversation with the teacher who told him to move off the bench, his painting allowed him to publically share his feelings about the incident. This experience gives evidence to embodied social action through painting. Through dialogue and examination of details in his artwork, I was able to better understand how he felt. Prior to this conversation, Logan had not explicitly expressed his feelings of sadness. The possibility of artistic response provided Logan social agency regarding the incident and a means to imagine new ways of being in relationships. Children can speak powerfully about their feelings through details, placement, and size of objects and colors represented in their artwork (Albers 1999; Kuby in press; Kuby 2013; van Leeuwen & Jewitt 2001). Logan used painting as a way to role-play possible solutions to the teachers’ demands on the playground, which potentially could foster future social change.

Social action using bodies and imaginations. I decided to read Sister Anne’s Hands to the class; this story portrays the difficulty faced by an African American nun teaching at a white Catholic school during the early 1960s. As I read, the children asked about...
When discussing his painting, Logan said “I never want that to happen again.”

nuns, Catholicism, and angels. In the middle of the story is a rhyme that a child had written on a paper airplane and thrown at Sister Anne:

Roses are red, violets are blue,
Don’t let Sister Anne get any black on you.

We talked about what this rhyme might mean. Nobody answered immediately. Most of the children disagreed with the idea that our skin color can wipe off, but a few minutes later Ellie brought the conversation back to whether touching could turn skin black. We discussed how the parents in the story back then were misguidedly afraid for their children to be in Sister Anne’s classroom. Some children in our group continued to bring up the rhyme, wondering whether touching each other really resulted in skin wiping off; the rhyme had literal meaning for them. Later that day, I heard a few children rereading the book. They focused specifically on the rhyme, still trying to understand if skin color can really wipe off on another person’s skin, and used their bodies to test out their hypotheses.

This example illustrates how young children used their bodies and imaginations to deepen social connections through critical inquiry. We used images in the book to process the injustices of racism and segregation, but the conversation did not stay there. The children embodied social action by trying to prove to one another that skin tone does not “wipe off.” Although this was not a large-scale social action project, within our learning community particular students were adamant in their research via embodied action and eager to share their understanding of race. Through role play in relational context, they co-constructed social meaning of race, which in turn helped them understand the unjustified accusations in the paper airplane letter. Role play such as this has roots in the Freirian theatre of the oppressed, which is a drama technique used to reflect Freire’s ideas on educational transformation (1970/2005).

Conclusion: Rethinking critical inquiry in the early years

In my study, I found that social action does not always have to be visible, as in a class petition or a survey. Social action can be evident in a child painting about an experience to share with classmates or role-playing multiple perspectives of book characters to better understand how various people experience injustice.

My research concurs with Sahni’s work, which encourages teachers to consider how critical social theory impacts young children and how we apply these theories in teaching. Even though the children and I did not
The framework of teacher research helped me listen to the children and carefully observe their experiences and responses to personal injustice. From these observations, I co-created a critical inquiry curriculum with the children. However, I struggled with how much to push my own agenda rather than return to the children’s questions—was the playground incident more important to me than the children? Although the children and I did not talk with the teachers on the playground, create a petition, or collectively take outside social action through a project, we did create a space for ourselves in our classroom to respond to experiences and discuss social issues and local historical events. This space promoted a shifting of relationships as the children felt empowered to speak up, such as Logan finally sharing his experience on the playground bench and Annie dialoguing with me about Rosa Parks. It is necessary to give children, even the youngest, spaces in schools to dialogue, envision, and act upon new and more just ways of living.

As we watch curriculum unfold, we need to be aware of the language we use and our own biases in co-creating curriculum. We must consider how young children confront the teachers on the playground about the bench rule, we spent weeks dialoguing on the underlying principles of the event, focusing both on our collective experiences with injustice as well as historical events in our school community and our ideas on racial segregation.

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might express social action within the context of their ongoing relationships. Perhaps the conditions that foster an unexpected renewal of relationships deserve a more prominent place in discussions of critical inquiry in early childhood. Hannah Arendt asked us to “expect the unexpected” (Berger 2010). As educators, embracing unexpected moments and shifts in relationships is not easy. These moments are “fissures” — new directions in learning prompted by children’s critical thinking and problem solving (Kuby 2011b). The playground incident was an unexpected moment that created a curricular opening for an exploration of social injustices and equal rights. This project showed me that both the young children I teach and I are ready and capable of thinking and acting from a critical perspective regarding power, race, and privilege. I also now see how teacher research can position us as the co-creators of our own lines of inquiry along with children.

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