Creating a Space for Critical Talk, Writing, and Action in the Elementary Classroom

By Stephanie Baker

I am a White woman from a working class family who grew up on a chicken farm in North Georgia. Dorothy Allison (1988) described feeling that her life was deemed contemptible by others and, like her, I felt the same. I wanted to be somebody else when I grew up. My entire life, I distanced myself from performing as redneck, white trash, trailer trash, or poor. These performances kept people out of the group that lived in nice houses, valued education, and went to college. So, in my mind, I thought if I act like those people who went to college and live in nice houses, then I will get what they have too. However, if I acted like the people around me then I would be in the same place as my parents and their parents, and above all else I was determined for that not to happen to me.

Just recently, with my enrollment in graduate school, I began to explore why I thought these things about myself, my family, and even other people like my own family. I was 28 when I told university colleagues that I grew up in a trailer. In the back of my mind I wondered, “Will they think less of me?” Over time, I came to see what I felt, and sometimes still feel,
as dangerous: dangerous to think that the poor and working class have done something wrong and need to be corrected. A feminist scholar, Valerie Walkerdine (1991), described how she learned to question discourses, like these, through her academic studies; she still could not find a space to talk about growing up “a working class girl who became a teacher and then an academic” (157). Like these women and many others, I want a space to talk about growing up as a girl who was subdued by dangerous discourses because I did not know they even existed, into a teacher who created a classroom where these discourses could be critiqued by my students and me.

The next sections are snapshots of my classroom practices that tell of a classroom where a newly feminist teacher embraced critical pedagogy to open a space where students could question power and disrupt some of the normative discourses shaping them. In this article, discourse means more than spoken or written language; it is a term to describe how reading, writing, speech, action, and even silence construct people’s beliefs and actions (Bove 1990). Additionally, I reveal my background and classroom practices not to create the notion that other teachers must be like me or do exactly as I do to engage students in critical pedagogy, but to show how discourses shaped me, and how I was able to question them. This notion of critically reflecting on who we are and how we came to be that way I hope will spark ideas for other teachers to use in the classroom to open spaces where their students can also engage in critical talk and action.

Teacher Researcher

In Trash, a collection of short stories, Dorothy Allison (2002) wrote, “If people are going to kick you, don’t just lie there. Shout back at them” (41). When I was in elementary, middle, and high school, I never “shouted back.” Teachers went so far as to complain that I was too quiet. I did everything they asked and did well in school. In kindergarten, I already knew how to act so that I would not be called trailer trash or put in the slow group.
I knew what made teachers and kids make these judgments on people like my family and, as a girl and for a long time afterwards, all of my actions showed that I agreed with them. I tried not to sound country or be too loud when I spoke, so maybe that is why I was so quiet. Country and loud meant bad to me, and above all else I wanted to be a good girl. So I followed every rule. Usually, as a teacher, I would attribute these excellent school behaviors to the wonderful upbringing provided by parents, but when my Mama was growing up, she “shouted back” all the time, so why didn’t I? I didn’t “shout back” because I blamed my mother for her lack of success, and somehow I thought that “shouting back” had screwed up her life. I did not understand that she and I lived in a world divided through discourses. She attempted to question this divide, which upset those who were on the other side of it, but I never questioned oppressive beliefs. However, now I look back on a classroom where my students, who also came from marginalized positions, shouted against their oppression, and I wonder what made them shout back at such an early age?

**Our Classroom and Our Community**

During the 2009-2010 school year, I taught fifth grade in a public, Title I, elementary school in a small city in North Georgia, sixteen miles east of the trailer I grew up in. But my classroom looked different from the fifth grade classroom I attended. That year I had twenty-five students, nine girls and sixteen boys. Of the nine girls, four were Mexican American, one was Puerto Rican American, one was African American, two defined themselves as biracial (one parent was white and one parent was black), and one girl was Vietnamese American. Of the sixteen boys, ten were Mexican American, one was El Salvadoran American, one was White American, two were African American, two were biracial (one boy had a parent who was African-American and the other White American, while the other boy had two Lesbian, African-American mothers and a Mexican American father.) Their languages were diverse and complex, consisting of Mexican Spanish, Puerto Rican Spanish, Southern American English, White Dominant English, African American English, and Vietnamese. All of my students came from poor or working poor families, and most lived in public housing. The city was the center of a large agricultural industry which employed many parents and grandparents of these students. The current recession in the United States and, specifically, in Georgia, had hit many of these families hard. There was talk of unemployment and no money to buy groceries. During this economic downturn, our county decided to crack down on “illegal” immigrants and built a new privately funded detention center for “illegals” within walking distance of the school.

That year, more than any other, my students were critical theorists. They questioned, discussed, wrote about, and protested instances of oppression and inequity. They openly used Spanish and African American English in the classroom, asked if their lesbian parents would go to Hell, wrote about their fathers in jail, described how their languages were made fun of, and resisted anti-immigrant talk. Usually, these topics are unacceptable or at least uncomfortable for many elementary school teachers. How was this able to happen in my classroom? I suggest that this space was opened because I was
also critically exploring and questioning my own past and present, and this critical spirit spilled over into my classroom. By recognizing the existence of these dangerous ideas in and around me, it allowed me to act against oppression and actively try to disrupt these ideas in the classroom. I transferred this critique of my own life into classroom practice by using journaling, circle time, disconnections, and a year-end social justice action research project to allow students to do some “shouting back” of their own. All students participated in these activities, but to be brief and clear, this article focuses on my practices and the responses of one student, Angelica.

Angelica

Angelica was born in Mexico, and as a toddler immigrated to Georgia with her parents. During the 2009-2010 school year, she went back to Mexico for about eight weeks to “get her papers” and visited her family that she had not seen in years. She was often so quiet that she was overlooked by teachers, and, ashamedly, sometimes by me. Angelica was one of the few students in my classroom who had retained Mexican-accented English, despite attending elementary school in Georgia since kindergarten. Because of the established idea that Mexican accented English is not fluent English, it was often assumed she lacked advanced abilities in English, even though this idea is not true at all; her English and Spanish linguistic abilities were more advanced than other students her age. In turn, she was also one of the few Latina fifth graders who was classified as an English Language Learner. The next sections describe classroom practices that illustrate how her classroom performance was able to disrupt her subjection to the English Language Learner label, gender roles, and immigrant oppression.

Circle Time

Students began critiquing dangerous discourses during circle time. Circle time was at the end of the day, a few times a week, and students shared writing, concerns, or books. Sometimes, I would use recent news to bring up issues, such as immigration reform, but mostly it began with, “Okay, who wants to talk or share today?” Often these discussions sparked new writing ideas for students, and many critical actions and writings began as a story shared by a student during circle time. Angelica shared her concern about her mother who never stops working. Her mother got up before dawn and came home in the afternoon to cook, clean, and take care of the children. Angelica saw men, including her father, go outside to talk and play soccer, but women only got together to do the “laundry.” It was their only time to talk. Women never get the car and often do not have a license, according to Angelica. After listening to Angelica’s thoughts, I asked what made her think about these things, and she shrugged a little and simply said, “I’ve just always thought that.” Her comments showed her dislike for the unequal division of labor and access in her home and homes around her. When she shared these ideas, other students responded that that was normal, or that their fathers shared worked equally with their mothers. No one agreed with Angelica. However, Angelica continued questioning the normal around her. She eventually wrote a narrative expressing these ideas:

I want to talk about women because
they are special to me because I think they are hard working people. I mean you always see them doing laundry or cleaning houses or taking care of children or working in a job. I mean you always see them doing something. How come men don’t do that kind of stuff? I mean how come men have the opportunity to have a license or a car. Why can’t a woman have that, too? What if there was an emergency and the lady did not have a car? That is not fair to women.

While she talked about her mom and how she often helped her, I thought about when I began to question the inequities between men and women in my life, or even social inequity at all. I did it secretly for a long time; I never told anyone else that I felt as Angelica did. Certainly, I never mentioned these ideas at school, because I knew that these critical ideas would be seen as heretical. My life as a girl and woman was shaped by discourses that said women were weaker vessels, wives submitted to husbands, and the home was taken care of by a woman. Just as I never questioned why someone would think less of me for living in a trailer, neither did I question the normal roles of women.

Using a critical feminist lens to look at my classroom practices gave me entrance to other inequities. For instance, when I compare my life to Angelica’s, I realize that we share common struggles and interests. However, given my white skin, I only needed to alter my physical appearance slightly and other behaviors to be included in White dominant society. However, Angelica will never be White. This was true for most of my other students as well; even if they adopt the language and behavioral standards of the dominant group in the United States, they will still never completely fit because of the way they look. My students shouted back at this “unfitting” by sharing stories about their lives. For instance, one student’s father had been arrested at a raid at his work, a raid that targeted those with brown skin. Now, he did not know where his dad was but, last he heard, he was somewhere in Florida, awaiting deportation; he had not heard from him in months. This story disrupted my own racist beliefs, even though I knew that anti-immigrant discourses were growing stronger. I felt ashamed to realize that it was really happening to my students, and their family members were literally disappearing. He shared this with the entire class, and we responded with outrage at the arrest and sadness about the separation. It led us into a discussion of why skin color does matter.

Circle time seemed to provide a way to think differently about some of these oppressive realities in our lives, and to question those things we are afraid of (Jones 2006). When I was in elementary school, there was not a space for me to question any kind of oppression. But what if there had been? Would I have shouted back at an earlier age?

**Journaling**

In the mornings, the students wrote in journals. I would post, “Write in your journal,” on the board and sometimes I would post prompts to help, but students never had to write to the prompt. Sometimes I asked about favorite songs or places, or posted a photograph to critique. When students’ writing was mundane—three straight days of writing about soccer—I would post a prompt that was meant to spark some kind of critical dis-
discussion. For example, after we heard some speakers who were former gang members in our city speak about their experience, I asked the students to write about their own experience with gangs. They put folders up all around their desks to create private spaces to write. They wrote for more than thirty minutes. Another time I posted a WWII photograph of book burnings and asked, “Why would Nazis burn books?” Mostly, students responded with something about not liking books, but one student stated that books make you think differently, so the government wanted to control the way people thought by controlling what they read. This idea of thinking differently about what was going around us guided my thoughts for teaching.

One afternoon, I was at home reading Angelica’s response to the prompt about gangs. I cried over her worry about gangs and her fear that a gang would try to convince her baby brother to join when he was old enough. Her selflessness was always apparent in her writing, but I began to wonder what Angelica thought about her future. The next day I sat down to conference with her about her writing, and she said she was stuck. So I started asking questions. I suggested that instead of focusing on the other people around her like her mom, dad, and baby brother, why not write about herself? She told me that she wants to get a job and buy a house for her parents and help them pay the bills. I remembered that Angelica and I had shared the same desire to learn languages, interpret for people so that they can understand, and travel to different places. She said, “I really want to go to college and travel everywhere, see everything, and learn a lot of languages . . . but I have to help my parents . . . no . . . I want to help them.” She was already worried that she would have to choose between these two identities. To her she could not have both. Women cannot have careers and also carry the responsibilities of a home and family. She said that sometimes she tries not to think about these possibilities, but she knows that if she stops thinking about her dreams, then they have no chance of coming true. She later wrote this narrative:

My name is Angelica and I am 11 years old and I have a dream of becoming a polyglot or making history and that people know me of what I did. I want to do a lot of cool stuff but at the same time I want to help my parents because they work very hard for I can have food and clothes. I want to buy them a house, a car a lot. What I want to buy them, but I also want to be someone in life and what about if when I grow up and I end up having kids then I will not be able to help my parents or achieve my dream of become a important person. And if you wonder why am I thinking of that right now, it is because when you say you will think of it tomorrow but when you notice it, you will be all grown up and you are not going to know what is the first step of becoming…

Like Angelica, I felt this same sense of responsibility toward my parents, and it is often implied by others that I am responsible for them, for my husband, and that I should have children, because that is what women do. I suggest that this motherly responsibility that Angelica and I felt are what Judith Butler (1993) called being “girled” (7) by those around us and even ourselves. The language we use and the people we know tell us what women should be like: women who take
care of others, women who either take care of families or take care of a career, women who must be good girls to get by. Angelica and I shared a love for many things: travel, languages, and issues of social justice. We used what we knew and where we were from to shout back in the ways we knew how. I shouted back through teaching and writing. She shouted as a student and daughter through her writing. Together we yelled a little louder.

Disconnections from Dominant Discourses

When I was little, my Mama always said, “Stephanie’s got champagne taste and beer money.” She was referring to my desire to belong to the middle-class. I did not want to live in a trailer when I grew up, or ride around in an embarrassing car like my Daddy’s multi-colored truck, nicknamed Old Bertha. Like me, Angelica wrote about her desire to move up in America’s class system in a story titled, “Hasta que el dinero nos separe/Until the Money Separates Us.” It stemmed from a circle time discussion of money, who has it, who does not, and why. Unlike my experience, Angelica was able to write about how her relationship with her parents may drastically change depending on her educational and marriage choices in her future. However, through my educational life, at least until I reached the end of a Master’s degree, I did not realize that I would also be separated from my family with my change in class and educational position. In my schooling, this transition was never posed as problematic; rather it was the sign of success, and it meant everything would be better if I got an education and made more money.

Dorothy Smith (1989) spoke of living in a world that you do not belong in. Sometimes, I feel disconnected from every world, as if none of them are mine. I am sure my students had and will have similar feelings. Even though I do not want to think like I thought before, changing my mind has created a physical separation from my family, and it is difficult to deal with. For Angelica, this may mean that she will delay marriage and having children, unlike her mother, grandmother, and aunts. Can she negotiate this disconnection from her family? What about the student who is physically disconnected from his father who was deported? Can his mother support her children on her small income?

Another example of disconnections (Jones 2007) happened during an oral history project. The students took on the persona of a historical figure, so they looked through the social studies book for ideas. My Latina students, Mexican heritage, did not find one woman like them in color and language mentioned in the book, so I encouraged them to look elsewhere. I felt that if students recognized their disconnections from the content and history in the social studies book, then they could also establish connections with people left out of the text. For Angelica, I suggested that she research the life of Sylvia Mendez, a civil rights activist with Mexican/Puerto Rican heri-
tage. At eight years old Sylvia testified in the case, Mendez v. Westminster, which secured the ruling that it was unconstitutional to segregate children of Mexican/Latin descent from white children at school. Angelica read about Sylvia’s life and watched documentaries about the famous court case. She made connections to Brown v. Board of Education, and she talked with me about segregation and the schooling of children of color. She stated that segregation was over, but I encouraged her to look around the classroom and think about the students in our school. There was one White, non-Latino student in our classroom; the school student population was less than five percent White, while the city’s population was majority White, non-Latino. I wanted her to consider that segregation was not over.

Near the end of the school year, the students presented their projects to other grade levels. They spoke in the first person, and Angelica began, “Hello, I’m Sylvia Mendez, and I was a poor Mexican girl who wanted to end segregation of Mexican students and white students.” Angelica was nervously stuttering through her presentation, and a look of frustration came over her face, so she turned her paper over and from memory, she started sharing the courage and strength of Sylvia Mendez. She told us how this Mexican girl changed America by integrating the Mexican schools with the White schools, protesting racism, and later by adopting girls who did not have homes. I wonder how my performance in school would have been different if a teacher had led me to Dorothy Allison, a red-headed woman who wrote about many experiences similar to my mom and me. Maybe I would have become an emerging critical theorist earlier in my life.

Action Research Projects

At the end of the year, the students did action research projects. They chose a real life issue or problem to explore and take action about. One student, Roberto, was adamant about the city’s skateboarding ban, and he formed a group of like-minded students to research the ban and explore possibilities for the creation of a skateboarding park; at the end of their research, the group presented their project to the school and community. Another group researched hate groups in our state; another researched the high teen pregnancy rate in our county. Angelica formed a small group of students who together explored the current issues of deportation in the United States. With her action research group, she created a wiki to inform the public about the deportation experience and its harm to children and to advocate for change in the form of faster and easier paths to citizenship, or, in her words to “get papers.” Near the end of the school year, her action research group shared their wiki with other students, teachers, and community members, and sometimes the responses were not positive. One teacher said, “They don’t understand the complexity of immigration.” I argued that they, immigrants and children of immigrants, understand better than anyone else.

Where Does This Leave Us?

These circumstances and discourses will never happen exactly this way again. That year I saw children emerging as critical theorists, but I still felt like a failure as a teacher in many other ways—the standardized testing and the inability to meet the school’s demand. For instance, five minutes before the last faculty meeting
of the year, the school administrator told me, “Not enough of your students passed the standardized math test; I’m moving you to another grade level.” This was after he denied my request for two days of professional leave to study in Mexico on a teacher grant I had won. I was devastated, so I decided not to return to teaching for the next year and, instead, I took an assistantship at the university.

So what can other teachers take away from this? Perhaps to examine the discourses that have shaped your life. How have you come to be who you are? What everyday ideas and practices in your life do you see as just normal? For us teachers, it should not stop there. What of the dominant discourses in classrooms? What are they telling students to do and believe? How can these dominant discourses be disrupted? And why even try? Among the many pressures that teachers perform under, I wonder how other teachers can negotiate the demands of teaching in schools and create critical classrooms. Ultimately, I feel like I did not do that. I had to give up one for the other. I argue that what I did that year was better than the constant use of test prep books and multiple-choice practice. Inciting critical talk and action was the only way I saw for a possibility of people being better. I suggest, like many others, that the idea of social justice still lies in thoughts that have not been thought yet, and new thoughts can only be brought about if the ones we already have are critiqued and contested (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bakhtin, 1975/1981; Foucault, 1983).

**References**


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