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# Review of the book *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*, 10th anniversary edition, by Vivian Maria Vasquez

Lori McKee

Western University, lmckee@uwo.ca

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Reviewer details:

Lori McKee

Western University, Canada

Vivian M. Vasquez, *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children: 10th Anniversary Edition*. Routledge, London and New York, 2014; 194 pp. ISBN:978-0-415-73317-5, CDN \$44.97 (pbk)

Over a decade ago, Vivian Vasquez (2004) introduced readers to the ways she and her kindergarten students negotiated and co-constructed a critical literacies curriculum in their classroom. In her original text, *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*, Vasquez problematized notions of early childhood by engaging in critical literacies with her young students, literacies typically reserved for much older children. Furthermore, Vasquez stretched the boundaries of early childhood and of traditional schooling by positioning young children as co-constructors of a classroom curriculum rooted in their interests.

*In Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children: 10th Anniversary Edition*, Vasquez situates the critical literacies discussion within a high stakes accountability culture and the changing communication landscape. The core of the new edition remains the same as the original text and calls on educators to privilege the questions children ask about everyday issues in the construction of classroom curricula. This central premise continues to be necessary given that questions remain about whether young children are capable of engaging in critical discussions (Comber, 2013). In the new edition, Vasquez encourages greater interplay between a critical literacies classroom curriculum and the prescriptive, mandated curricula common in many classrooms. This edition further extends the original text by linking critical literacies with digital technologies and presents these connections as possibilities for amplifying the process, production, and expression of a critical literacies curriculum.

In this review, I follow Vasquez' lead and closely attend to the curricular context and changing communication landscape to explore critical literacy as a social practice that can be supported through digital modes within an educational context that favours standards-based outcomes. Vasquez' focus on context and multimodality illuminated, for me, an educator of young children, the expansive learning opportunities a critical curriculum can afford for young children and how I might create space for critical literacies within my classroom. I focus my discussion on each section of the text, and the companion website (<http://www.routledge.com/cw/vasquez/>), through the lenses of multimodal literacy and literacy as a social practice to highlight the ways in which this text is useful to both practitioners and scholars in the field of multiliteracies.

Vasquez invites readers into the text with her definition of critical literacy as a *way of being* in the world (p.3); a perspective that guides participation in and outside schooled contexts. As part of a classroom curriculum, critical literacies provide a way for educators and students to collaborate in addressing problematic social issues in the school and community. Thus, critical literacies involve disrupting problematic ways of being as well as designing solutions through questioning, negotiating, and discussion. Vasquez explains that the emergent, generative, and collaborative processes of critical literacies are integral to negotiating a critical literacies curriculum.

The beginning chapter maps the complexities of creating spaces for critical literacy within a high-stakes accountability culture. In a new section for this edition entitled *Getting beyond Prescriptive Curricula, the Mandated Curricula, and Core Standards*, Vasquez explains that educators can create curricular space for critical literacies within a prescriptive, mandated curriculum. I believe this point is critical with the increasing pressures of benchmarks and standards, even within kindergarten classrooms. To help navigate these tensions and create curricular space for critical literacies, Vasquez encourages educators to understand curriculum expectations so they can intentionally address the required standards and integrate critical literacies *as curriculum* (p. 19) and a fundamental part of classroom learning.

Vasquez turns to the classroom in Chapter 2 and shares the curricular audit trail (of over 130 artifacts) that she co-constructed with her kindergarten students. Vasquez explains that “an audit trail is a visual articulation of learning and thinking” (p. 36) and a tool for generating inquiries, sharing meanings, and negotiating curriculum with children. The audit trail example illustrates how children were constructors rather than consumers of curriculum as they generated topics for inquiry and selected images to represent their learning. New to this edition, Vasquez shares innovations of audit trails shared by educators who utilize Web 2.0 technologies as well as more traditional modes to make learning visible. These examples provide a medium for the educator to imagine possibilities for constructing audit trails that suit their particular classroom context.

Chapters 3-6, *The French Café*, *Our Friend is a Vegetarian*, *Save the Beluga*, and *We Know How McDonald's Thinks* illuminate particular issues that spurred the construction of the critical literacies curriculum. Though each demonstration chapter highlights diverse examples, I see commonalities across events.

The events:

- emerged from incidents that the children identified as problematic. These incidents occurred in the school and community and became part of the classroom curriculum through teacher observation, informal conversations, and classroom discussions.
- resulted in action through petitions, letters, surveys, and fund-raising. In all events, children had opportunities to extend their literacies as they designed solutions to the problems identified using multiple modes of communication including image, text, song, art, and sound.
- repositioned a group that had been marginalized or misunderstood. For example, the kindergarten students were recognized as members of the school community, vegetarian families were included at the school barbecue, beluga whales were understood as endangered animals, and child consumers were repositioned from passive to active.

At the conclusion of each demonstration chapter, Vasquez includes *Critical Reflections and Pedagogical Suggestions* that provide insight into the work published in the first edition. She acknowledges that since the initial publication, the communication landscape has drastically changed to now include various forms of digital technologies that are readily available in many classrooms. Vasquez encourages educators to envision what digital tools might afford for supporting children’s expression of critical literacies. Vasquez calls educators to reflect on their practices, and to create spaces for critical discussions within their classrooms that engage children as co-constructors of a critical literacies curriculum.

The final chapter of the text, *A Look Back Over the Year*, illustrates how the critical literacies curriculum created spaces for children to reimagine what the world could be, to generate and carry out plans for action, and to share the processes and products of their inquiries with others. Within the critical literacies curriculum, the children in Vasquez' class experienced many opportunities to engage in complex projects that expanded their literacies and communication practices. Vasquez draws on these experiences to encourage readers to imagine how they might incorporate critical literacies in ways that reflect contemporary literacies. New and emerging technologies present opportunities for educators as they negotiate a critical literacies curriculum through different modes and media in a digital age.

The appendices provide examples of some of the possibilities that different modes and media afford for enhancing the construction of audit trails. Vasquez uses examples of audit trail innovations using different multimodal tools as an invitation for readers to envision how they might draw on the affordances of technologies to support the construction of an audit trail in their particular classroom. As technologies continue to develop, Vasquez foresees further possibilities for digital audit trails including the use of gaming software for creating audit trails within a virtual world.

The new companion website (<http://www.routledge.com/cw/vasquez-9780415733175/>) has several resources designed to enrich the reading of the book. For example, the section entitled *Resources* includes hyperlinks to academic and professional resources including a list of picture books that have been used to support critical conversations with young children. Though the website presents the children's books as tools for opening spaces for critical conversations, stronger connections between the text and this resource would further clarify the uses of these texts, and highlight the possibilities that *all* texts have for fostering critical discussions. To this end, I suggest that the website reiterate Vasquez' contention that one does not need a *special* critical literacy text to engage young children in critical discussions; any text can be read from a critical perspective when used strategically (p. 4). If Vasquez cross-references the text with the *Resources* section these texts become catalysts for innovation of a critical literacies curriculum.

*Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children: 10th Anniversary Edition* supports educators in negotiating a critical literacy curriculum with students of all ages within a changing communication landscape. As an educator of young children, I found that Vasquez' examples resonated with my practice and led me to consider how I might draw on technology to support critical literacies. I believe the authentic, flexible, and emergent nature of the critical literacies curriculum presented in this text will have wide appeal to other educators as well. For pre-service educators, this volume provides a model of the types of complex learning of which young children are capable when supported through a carefully constructed classroom curriculum. The text may help in-service educators of young children envision how a critical literacies curriculum might "fit" within the mandated curriculum of their district. Educators of older children and adults may also find this text useful as the open-ended emergent curriculum can be adapted for use with any age group. The text encourages all educators to reimagine practices and consider how technologies and multimodal approaches can support the negotiation of critical literacies in classrooms.

## References

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