Public voices: Critical literacy and newspaper writing in a fourth grade classroom

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Introduction

If you were to walk into Mr. Hernandez’ classroom in the Spring of 2009, you would see groups of fourth grade students interviewing one another on the back rug, others working at desks with rapt attention on their writing, and still others interviewing peers and teachers to investigate topics for potential newspaper articles in order to produce a class newspaper. Among the low hum of voices, you would hear children working to capture the just-right language to make their point in their soon-to-be-published editorial pieces. The three teachers in the room—the classroom teacher, Mr. Hernandez, and two researchers, Katie Peterson and Melissa Wetzel, would be sitting in different corners of the classroom, conferencing with a student, at the computer with students publishing their work, or on the floor listening in and participating in conversations about local issues. Topics discussed would be those relevant to the school and town of Creekview, a working-class, mostly Latino community on the outskirts of a southwestern city in the United States. The above-described learning spaces are typical of a classroom that embraces the structure of a literacy workshop.

Literacy workshop approaches, as described above, provide students with opportunities to make choices about what they read and write (Atwell, 2007; Ray, 2008). Though workshops have been conceptualized differently, common components include mini-lessons, independent practice, conferencing, and public sharing. Traditionally, the goal of writing workshops is to allow spaces for teachers to conference with an individual student or students working on the same feature of their writing in order to coach students on literacy practices related to their literacy development (Graves, 1994). While much instruction occurs individually in workshop models, workshops are also public spaces where students may develop deeper understandings of each other’s perspectives and build new ways of looking at and approaching texts they encounter. For instance, mini-lessons are spaces where teachers model writing and reading strategies, facilitate conversations about students’ writing, and encourage students to draw on their current lived experiences. When students are encouraged to engage in discussions about texts shared during mini lessons, they have the opportunity to hear, synthesize, and consider one another’s points of view (Flint & Laman, 2012; Laman & Van Sluys, 2008), thus practicing one dimension of critical literacy (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2007). Additionally, most workshop classrooms end writing sessions with an author share, a practice when students share their writing and question one another and texts, again practicing critical literacy. As we will discuss in our review of literature, researchers have found workshops to be fruitful places for students to negotiate
power and construct identities in relation to discourses and ideas in one another’s writing, another dimension of critical literacy (Lensmire, 1994, 2000; Lewison & Heffernan, 2008).

The development of critical literacies in a workshop was of great interest to us as we conducted our own study of writing in a classroom focused on a newspaper project. In this slice of a larger study, we looked closely at the nature of students’ writing for a classroom newspaper to understand critical literacy practices within workshop spaces. Specifically, we asked, “How did students construct pieces for a newspaper within one writing workshop? What features of critical literacy did students draw upon in their compositions?”

Theoretical Framework

As stated above, critical literacy practices include considering multiple perspectives in texts, the questioning of social practices, and the construction of identities in relation to discourses within texts. We can consider critical literacy in terms of two complementary practices: the deconstruction and reconstruction of texts (Luke, 2004). In order to deconstruct texts, people critically analyze how texts represent the world and construct people’s roles in a given social context. Texts often reflect society’s injustices and limit possibilities, so deconstruction usually refers to identifying injustices in a text. Examples of deconstruction are common in research on critical literacies with young children (see for example, Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001; Vasquez, 2004). Critical literacy also includes the reconstruction of texts, the act of discovering new possibilities for the ways things might be (Janks, 2000; Luke, 1995). Often, when writing and discussing texts, people engage in reconstruction by drawing on their own experiences and identities to speak back to texts. Theorists often talk about drawing on multiple perspectives—the act of putting one’s own perspective in conversation with others—as one key aspect of critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2007). To reconstruct a text, then, is to ask whose perspectives are represented, whose are left out, and how the consideration of all viewpoints informs our ability to understand and solve problems.

As students engage in critical literacy, their identities are constructed, enacted, and revised. Our definition of identities is that identities are fluid and constructed in social spaces as people enact discourses—identifiable ways of being in the world that are constructed by language and evident in texts (Gee, 2011). In this article, we talk both about individual identities as well as collective identities that students engage with, such as discourses of being a “good student” or being “a boy”. Discourses of interest are usually those that unequally privilege some perspectives over others and lead to diminished power for members of a community. However, through practicing critical literacy, students often come to understand more about the discourses they are enacting and in turn, actively construct new identities or ways of being in the world.

As students practice critical literacy, they not only revise their identities but they revise the discourses that are present in the social space of the classroom. In this study, we draw on Bakhtin’s theory of discourse, namely that three types of discourses circulate within social spaces: authoritative, internally-persuasive, and ennobled discourses (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981). Authoritative discourses guide practices because they are mandated or have become normative in a social context. Powerful individuals or groups, such as a teacher enforcing a test-driven curriculum, often enforce these discourses. Authoritative discourses are ideological because they shape ways of seeing the world and concrete in that they guide and inform practices. Authoritative discourses are often deconstructed using critical literacy, because they are typically discourses that support normalized and oppressive views of the world.
Internally-persuasive discourses are discourses that people often associate with their identities. People actively call on these discourses in order to position themselves in relation to other people and ideologies. For instance, these are the discourses that students may call on when using Spanish to respond to a text that is written in English, calling on their identity as a Latino. It is important to note that internally persuasive discourses can be aligned with authoritative discourses. For example, as we will discuss in this article, an internally-persuasive discourse was that of “good student” that was useful to students when they wanted to align with the goals of schooling. An ennobled discourse is a “discourse made respectable” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 381). Internally-persuasive discourses become ennobled as they are taken up within a community in new ways, through dialogism. Typically, discourses become ennobled because they serve the interests of people within a group.

In our study we were interested how students used language in social contexts to deconstruct social practices and produce new texts. We looked for patterns in the ways students drew on authoritative discourses in their writing; how they constructed new discourses that drew on their identities; and finally at how discourses were ennobled through particular choices students made in their writing.

**Literature Review**

*Critical Literacy and Workshops*

Our work is dually situated with work on critical literacy practices and workshop approaches. Scholars of writing instruction have long promoted pedagogical models that break away from skills-based writing instruction in favor of responsive teaching to the topics, processes, and choices students make when they write (Flint & Laman, 2012). Through choice in writing topics, students often bring their own language and practices as well as lived experiences to their writing (Cuero, 2010; Espinosa, 2006; Laman & Van Sluys, 2008). For example, in Cuero’s study, the focal student, Jeniffer, composed writing in a dialogue journal that informed what the teacher knew about her funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Ari, in Laman and Van Sluys’ article, utilized his Hebrew writing to compose in English. In each of these studies, students created tools that emerged from their own practices of literacy in order to write more powerfully.

The literature reviewed above leaves several questions unanswered about how the community of practice in the classroom supports and extends students’ tools for writing. Other studies of critical literacy have focused more broadly on the social relationships within classrooms and how such classrooms support learners. Researchers have studied how writing is composed within communities of practice, over time, and the ways in which locally constructed tools support young writers in speaking up about social issues in their writing (Lensmire, 1994, 2000; Lewison & Heffernan, 2008). Lewison and Heffernan examined the picture books that students wrote in a third grade writer’s workshop, finding that students drew on a variety of discourses to construct a social issue, bullying, and attributed different identities and language practices to characters within these stories. The authors reflected on the role of the classroom environment and the classroom teacher in creating a “writing collective” with norms and tools attached, a space in which topics from the playground and the social life of the classroom were invited into the classroom. While this work leaves us understanding the powerful nature of local tools, we were cautioned by Lensmire (1994) to critically examine the social relationships within a writing workshop. Powerful practices often lift some voices and silence others. In our study, we were constantly reminded that students can and will take up writing identities in ways that are playful and exploratory, but also will sometimes marginalize others when given space to compose.
Our research contributes to work in the intersection of workshop approaches and critical literacy by providing a close analysis of language practices drawn upon when students compose. After describing our research design and the findings of this study, we conclude with the implications of this work for educators who are interested in closely observing students’ critical literacies, especially in classroom contexts where students may not usually have space for composing using public voices.

Research Design

Classroom Context
We collected our data at Creekview Elementary School (a pseudonym), a school identified as a “Blue Ribbon School”—a designation by the United States government that a public or private elementary, middle or high school’s students perform at very high levels on standardized tests or that significant gains in achievement have been achieved. Although high performing, this school has also been designated as a Title I facility—meaning the U.S. government provides supplemental funds to provide adequate resources for students—because of the high number of students who speak a first language other than English and who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Data were collected in a fourth grade classroom with students aged 10 to 12. Fifteen students consented to participate in the study, including 14 who self-identify as being Hispanic and one who identified as white. Twelve students who participated in this study speak Spanish with their families at home and two students learned English as a second language, but speak English at home. Mr. Hernandez described the school as a “stable, Creekview family,” explaining that many of the students have known one another since Kindergarten (Interview, Mr. Hernandez, March, 2011). In this paper, we draw on data from 12 students, four girls and eight boys, who composed more than one piece in writing workshop that was brought to publication in the classroom newspaper. Of these 12 students, all but two spoke some Spanish at home or lived in bilingual homes. All but one student was of Mexican descent. Mr. Hernandez was the classroom teacher, and we joined him to form an instructional team for the duration of this study. He is of Mexican descent, speaks some Spanish, but does not speak Spanish in his instruction. Through the duration of the study, he followed the standards-based curriculum mandated by the district and cooperated with testing preparation measures to raise scores. He completed his Master’s degree at the same university where the authors of this article work and was committed to practices that engaged students as active readers and writers in the classroom. Mr. Hernandez worked alongside Melissa and Katie as an instructional team, conferencing with the students and participating in discussions each day data were collected.

During the reading workshop in this classroom, our instructional team used read-alouds with critical social issues to model critical literacy practices that students then were asked to take up in their independent reading. Then, students chose books to read individually and share with others. Students responded to books in response journals. Teachers conferred, talking with students in ways that facilitated their thinking and writing. All three teachers guided discussions of critical social issues being represented through the texts during read-alouds and independent reading.

In terms of writing instruction, the focus of this paper, we followed the writing workshop structure Mr. Hernandez had previously established. We conducted mini-lessons about how authors compose editorials, book reviews, reports of local news, and human-interest stories using local newspapers as mentor texts. We explored ways that writers find out information by drawing on sources, presented that information in a way that makes an argument, and also the linguistic choices (humor, catchy headlines, etc.) that draw the reader into the story. We also focused on
stories that were counter narratives—alternative perspectives that challenged the status quo—to encourage students to draw on their voice and perspective in their stories (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). During conferences, we met individually with students to discuss their writing, often focusing on what sources of information they were drawing upon, audience, and style. Sometimes, our conferences were brainstorming sessions with authors who were deciding on topics for their writing. During sharing, we asked students to read articles they were working on to get feedback from the class. We often selected a student to share who had accomplished in his or her writing a practice we had taught earlier in a mini-lesson.

Data Collection
During the three-month study, Melissa and Katie collected data during reading and writing workshop, six hours a week. In both reading and writing workshops, a rotating camera crew of fourth grade students captured interactions during their workshop using iPod video cameras. In total, we collected approximately 170 videos of students, including videos of writing conferences between ourselves and students, interviews of other students filmed by students, videos of read-alouds, and videos of students presenting their writing. These videos ranged from 30 seconds to 30 minutes in length. We also collected students’ composed newspaper articles in three installments of the class newspaper. Our data sources also include a semi-structured interview conducted with the students at the end of the study. These interviews were conducted with focus groups (groups of 3-4 students) and were reflective, asking questions about their experiences in the workshops. Students also filled out a brief survey, listing the kinds of work they did in the workshop. Finally, we interviewed Mr. Hernandez again using a semi-structured interview protocol.

Data Analysis
In this article, we focus on the newspaper articles using qualitative approaches and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Rogers, 2011). CDA helped us better understand how language functioned within and across the newspaper and the ways in which students took up discourses in their writing. By looking at newspaper articles across the study, we were able to identify how authoritative discourses and alternative discourses were appropriated and used dialogically in newspaper writing (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981).

Our first step in our critical discourse analysis was to identify the genre of each article. This helped us categorize articles so that we could proceed with deeper analysis. We decided to include the author’s purpose and theme in our genre codes. Examples of genre codes included: how-to article, an article based on a survey, book review, and general reporting. We also coded students’ linguistic choices within each article and looked for patterns between the genre of the article and the genre of each linguistic choice. For example, surveys were marked by the choice to quote or paraphrase respondents to help make a set of points about a topic. This first round of coding was generative and two researchers coded each article. We discussed our coding and themes that were emerging from the data in terms of the linguistic choices students were making in their writing, which we called genre.

Next, we identified the discourse from which the author was writing. We identified discourses such as “being a good student means doing your homework” that were emerging for us across articles we analyzed. We also interpreted whether these discourses were authoritative, internally-persuasive, or ennobled (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981). To do so, we had to look at both across articles written by a participant and across the larger corpus of data to understand how the discourses operated in the social context of the classroom.
In this phase of CDA, we generated questions about the ways students were engaging in particular discourses as well. We were naming identities taken up by participants as they engaged with these discourses. For example, if the discourse was that of “a good student does his homework” we asked whether the participant was taking up an identity as that good student in her writing. Ways of engaging in discourses is what discourse analysts define as the style of the interaction and include the kinds of identities students are taking up in relation to particular discourses (e.g., Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Also, naming the style helped us identify how the writer positioned him or herself in relation to others. To identify style, we coded the transcripts for the linguistic choices made (e.g., quoting a friend, using a clever title, repetition, intertextuality, compare and contrast, naming a social issue, verb choice, passive voice, pronoun use) for each article. We then labeled these choices into three categories of language-in-use—ways of interacting (e.g., repetition, using argumentation, presenting contrasting choices of how to act or think); ways of representing the world (e.g., naming race and gender; explaining social practices); and ways of positioning oneself in relation to an idea about the world (e.g., using passive voice, using declarative sentences, using cognitive verbs like “I think”). What follows is a report of the patterns and themes resulting from this analysis.

Findings

Three volumes of the newspaper, 30 articles in all, were produced over a three-month period. Each newspaper was distributed to the class, the school and parents. For this project, each student had freedom to choose the topics in which they would like to write about. The most common type of article written was a survey (14 articles), in which students self-selected a topic and then interviewed classmates about their thoughts or feelings on the topic. The next most common article type was general reporting (8 articles), in which students picked up a topic they found interesting to explore through writing. A range of article topics existed within the general reporting article type, including reviews of movies and books, how-to’s, articles about school, poetry, and articles about sports. Perhaps because of our focus during reading workshop on critical social issues, students also wrote about how language, gender and segregation are represented in picture books. In what follows, we focus on articles that show three ways students practiced critical literacy within the space of writer’s workshop.

What it Means to Be a Good Student: Enacting Authoritative Discourses

Being a good student was an authoritative discourse present in a group of articles composed for the newspaper. Often, authoritative discourses can be oppressive to students, particularly students who have been historically marginalized in schools. For example, students may be expected to perform in particular ways in school that are not in line with their own cultural ways of practicing literacy, causing a tension for these students (Gutiérrez, 2006; Heath, 1983).

Four students, Olivia, Roberto, Felipe, and Ana, wrote articles reporting on how to be a “good student.” Across the pieces that fit this category, the students used primarily “I” statements. For example, Olivia wrote an article about her student teacher (not a participant in this study). Within this piece, Olivia documented the teaching of the student teacher, focusing on her opinion of the teacher’s practices. Specifically, she wrote, “I like the lessons she does, she always makes me smarter.” Along with “I” statements, Olivia used declarative sentences, and the affective verb “like” to indicate her preference for the ways her student teacher teaches. Students used “I” statements when describing actions of being a good student, such as listening, doing homework, going to bed early, etc.

Within “good student” pieces, students drew on discourses that connected between being successful in school and the future, for example, going to college. An authoritative discourse of
being a good student was operationalized by the students towards what Gutiérrez called “social
dreaming” (Gutiérrez, 2006). In this sense, the “good student” discourse was a powerful one,
one in which students were strategically positioning themselves as having this identity. Roberto
wrote an article about the relationship between having breakfast and doing well in school that
relied on the discourse of “readiness to learn” that we recognized from our own time as teachers
in public schools in the U.S. This discourse connects health (eating breakfast) to success in
school (being ready to learn). He writes,

    People just don’t eat breakfast, because some people don’t want to be smart. In my
school, we have to eat breakfast to listen, and to be smart, and to get good grades in
school. So I can go to college.

In this article, Roberto both calls on an authoritative discourse of the school, readiness to learn,
and positions himself as someone who chooses the identity of being ready to learn in his words,
“So I can go to college.”

Articles about being a good student contained sentences that were primarily declarative and
instructive, (e.g., “you have to...”) and often were contrastive in nature (e.g., “either you’ll ... or
you’ll ...”). Rather than directly quoting their peers, the articles based on survey data
summarized or paraphrased their classmates’ viewpoints. Ana wrote an article entitled “Why
Kids Don’t Go to Bed Early and Don’t Do Their Homework” that also called on the discourse of
“readiness to learn.” Ana’s article was about the connection between staying up late and not
doing well in school versus doing well in school and doing homework. In this piece, Ana uses
paraphrasing, contrastive language, and declarative statements to assert her viewpoint. She
wrote:

    Kids do their homework because they want to go to college. But there are other kids who
don’t want to grow up yet. I did a survey asking kids in my class whether they do their
homework. Then I asked them what time they went to bed. A lot of people went to bed late
because they were playing their games. But some people go to bed early because
they want to be prepared for school. Like for example, Ricki went to bed at 8:35 because
he went to Wal-Mart and Brian went to bed at one in the morning because he was
playing his DSI. The rest of my class went to bed at 9 or 9:30. This issue is important
because I think my classmates should come to school prepared and ready to work. They
also should be able to have good answers for when the teacher asks them questions.
SO GO TO BED EARLY!

Here, Ana also uses strong language and capital letters to enforce her viewpoint about the
value of going to bed early and cites strong examples of correct and incorrect behavior.

In this group of articles, students drew on authoritative discourses about what it means to be a
good student, and in doing so, presented themselves as good students. Additionally, each piece
took on an authoritative discourse that to be successful in school will equal a life of success.
They used linguistic tools to convince the reader of a particular stance or view about being a
good student. Although the students were constructing positive and powerful identities, these
moves are authoritative and didactic and left little room for multiple perspectives or a
reconstruction of what it means to be a good student. These students aligned themselves with
notions of learning in school that were passive and also took up ways of being in their writing
that positioned them as authoritative and powerful.

“I Hate School”: Deconstructing Texts with Ennobled Discourses

In contrast to the didactic promotion of the authoritative discourse, several students, including
Ernesto, Ricki, and Santiago wrote about school in deconstructive ways, using elements of
critique. This anti-school writing was representative of the tensions between the authoritative
discourse of being a good student and the actual, lived experiences of the students in the class.
In these pieces, the students wrote in order to convince a reader of their opinion. Humor was a tool that many students drew on in the newspaper after Ernesto’s first article, a humorous report entitled “Tacos.” Ernesto wrote in this piece, “Tacos must be famous because 61% of Mr. Hernandez’ class loves them. Local lady Mrs. Peterson thinks that the class is smart, because it is vegetables in a shell.” “Local lady” evoked the language of a newspaper reporter, and got a hearty laugh out of everyone in the room during a community share. Ernesto chose a topic that was not in opposition to school, but his cheeky article drew on many of the same linguistic tools as a later article that challenged directly the authoritative discourses of school.

The discourse of hating school was an internally-persuasive discourse for several writers. Internally-persuasive discourses indicate that the author knows that his words are his own as well as someone else’s and often are drawn upon in a way to garner support or be a part of a group (Matusov & von Duyke, 2010). We located this article as the central example of the internally-persuasive discourse of “I hate school”:

I Hate School by Ernesto
Have you ever felt so bored that you could actually fall asleep? Question—do you like to do work? Local teacher says, “No I hate doing work but I get paid a lot of cash.” Question—do kids need to stay in school? Local friend said, “No cause it’s boring!” Question—do you like to read? Local dude Santiago says, “No because reading is hard.” Question—will you get a job? Local friend Roberto said, “Yes because you can get a girl but school is still boring!” As you can see school is very boring, but my opinion is that I hate school but it’s worth it just to see my compadres!

The use of “local” was both humorous and an intertextual reference to Ernesto’s earlier work. In this article, Ernesto quoted Mr. Hernandez—who did say that he gets “paid a lot of cash” as a joke to Ernesto. In doing so, he positioned his teacher as sharing a discourse of hating school. By quoting his friends, as well, Ernesto portrayed this discourse as shared among the group of students quoted, ennobling this discourse. His emphasis on his friends’ opinions, and use of compadres, the Spanish word for friend, suggested he knew his perspective needed support because it was an alternative vision of what it meant to be a student in this school.

Appropriating this discourse, and illustrating the nature of internally-persuasive discourses as dialogic, Ricki similarly titled his piece, “No School for Ricki,” a clever title that engaged the reader and Santiago followed with “No School for Me.” It became clear, amongst this group of boys, that writing articles about hating school was a way to connect with one another and put forth a collective identity as boys who do not like school. In this set of articles, students drew on humor but also other strategies to convince readers of their position. As illustrated in the piece above, Ernesto posed questions, which served an important function, to bring the students who were reading into the piece and ask them to have an opinion. These questions asked the reader to dialogue about the issue at hand but still communicated a clear perspective on school. It was also important in these pieces to show that other students aligned with the perspective of the author. To do this, the writers drew readers in by providing specific examples of practices that the students did not like in school. These practices included tests, “sitting like perfect soldiers” (Ricki), sharing work with the class, showing work on math exercises, tucking in shirts, and all three mentioned that school was “boring”. These examples functioned to rally for support for the writer.

There were tensions between internally-persuasive discourses and the authoritative discourses of school. For example, Ernesto’s original article began with the phrase, “Have you ever felt so bored that you could kill for fun?” Mr. Hernandez and the vice principal of the school were concerned with this opening and asked Ernesto to rewrite the article. In our final interview with
Ernesto, we asked him about his writing about hating school to understand more about his choices. Ernesto was very clear that he wanted to gain collective support for his position and spur action:

    Ernesto: 'Cause, uh, uh, 'cause sometimes I get bored, [inaudible] I, I get, I have nothing else to do, and when I have nothing else to do I write about how much I hate school.
    Katie: And so what, what did you think, um, putting that in the paper, who did you think was going to read that?
    Ernesto: Everybody.
    Katie: Everybody. And what did you hope that that was going to do?
    Ernesto: They agree with me, protest to the school and shut it down.
    Katie: So, you were hoping to get people to agree with you?
    Ernesto: Yes.
    Melissa: What happened as a result of that? Did you, did you get support for your cause. When you wrote that article? Did people come with you, come along side of you and say, “Yes, I hate school too.”
    Ernesto: In my imagination they did. (Laughter)

When we asked about his process in composing this piece, he told us that he “hated it” and that it “made me (him) want to barf” (Interview, May, 2010). In his final interview, when he was asked if he thought the teachers should have edited the pieces that went into the paper for content and grammar, he told us he believed that writing should not have been edited, stating:

    Ernesto: (Pounds his fist on the desk) It’s our writing. We deserve our rights too, you know.
    Olivia: Yea but then some, uh, [what if] it hurts somebody’s feelings?
    Ernesto: Who cares?

Ernesto reconstructed ways of being in school through his writing, and was aware that he was doing so.

Through repetition of the discourse of “I hate school” taken up by the boys, this discourse became ennobled and was powerful enough to get the attention of the teacher and vice principal. Despite these repercussions, Ricki and Santiago took up Ernesto’s choice of topic and took up the opportunity to write about how they too disliked school, perhaps supporting Ernesto. Also, they may have learned the power of writing from Ernesto and were interested in the role of a powerful writer. Although he did not change his stance toward social action, Ernesto did learn to temper his use of powerful linguistic choices when he could be sanctioned. The students who wrote about hating school worked to gain support by presenting a strong voice, providing evidence for their claims, engaging dialogically with their audience, and by representing the affiliations and collective identity that was already respected in the class. These were strong anti-school positions related to discourses of resistance to school and identities that were in opposition to what it means to be a good student, but these pieces were accepted into the newspaper because they reflected practices of critical literacy.

Mr. Hernandez reported in a final interview that the empowerment students felt created a dynamic where students argued their perspective at all times. While he appreciated the deep thinking, Mr. Hernandez reported feeling tension when the students transferred this dialogic style to situations in which they were preparing for standardized tests. Specifically, he told us “they would argue about which answer was right and they would both have good, solid reasons why they thought they were right. I had to finally tell them, no this one is right,” (Final Interview, May, 2010). Despite this tension, Mr. Hernandez was committed to allowing his students to have freedom of topic in their newspaper articles, so these articles generally went unchallenged.
Taking up Critical Social Issues in the Newspaper

There were several other authors who drew on similar linguistic choices for connecting with the audience of the piece and persuade their classmates of a particular opinion. In these pieces, students positioned themselves in relation to a critical social issue that was addressed during read alouds. In reading workshop, we read books about gender roles and culture and language practices that were either written from critical perspectives or we practiced taking a critical perspective in relation to a social issue. In their writing, students took up these social issues by appropriating the linguistic features associated with critical talk around picture books. Because of our moves as teachers to bring these social issues into the classroom, the students were able to practice deconstruction and reconstruction of authoritative discourses in the classroom.

These articles were characterized by several linguistic choices. One choice was to open or end with a question. Carmen wrote an article called “Girls and Boys” in which she talked about “types of girls” who are “girlie” and also ideas about boys being “lazy”. The point of her article was summarized in questions that ended the article: “But everyone has a mystery: are guys better than girls? Are girls better than boys? It remains unknown.” The questions in this article and others—recall Ernesto’s use of questions in “Why I Hate School”—served an important function to ask the reader to engage in the author’s ideas about gender and reminded us of the ways we posed questions during read alouds to ask the students to engage. The use of questions is a dialogic choice that put the reader in conversation with the writer. However, the discourses Carmen drew upon were ennobled because of the books we read with the students about gender roles.

The students also drew on their personal relationships with other students to connect with the reader. Students were more likely to directly quote their classmates who aligned with a perspective when writing articles that proposed a particular position on a social issue. However, these articles differed from others discussed above in that they highlighted different perspectives on a particular issue to create social groups that were in alignment or disagreement with the author. For example, Maria wrote:

Girls! By Maria

Have you ever noticed that in picture books and chapter books girls are intimidated by boys? They are not represented as fighting or in violence. I hate some of those books because they think girls cannot be as tough as boys. I think that girls can do anything that boys can do, but we do it better. I think it should stop. Do you? I asked a boy, Ricki, and a girl, Carmen. Carmen said, “We can do anything better!” Ricki said, “No they can’t.”

In this article, Carmen and Ricki are posed as having different opinions and those opinions are placed next to each other to emphasize two perspectives about whether girls are able to do anything that boys can do. These contrasting opinions were always phrased as dichotomous choices, much like opposing viewpoints were expressed in articles about how to be a good student. In these articles about critical social issues, however, students were quoted directly as being on one side or the other, whereas in the good student pieces, students’ quotes were paraphrased or stated generally as opposing viewpoints.

In “Girls!”, Maria made linguistic choices such as the use of the verb phrases “I hate” and “I think” to offer a strong position in relation to the question of whether books are right in representing girls as “intimidated by boys”. Similarly, Carmen used “I hate” and repeated “I think” multiple times in “Girls and Boys” to assert her points about whether girls are better than boys. Although they drew on multiple perspectives in their writing, these pieces clearly stated the view of the student.
Similarly, in a group of articles reporting on book reviews, students took up critical social issues using persuasive language. The difference between these pieces and those like “Girls!” and “Girls and Boys” was the emphasis placed on drawing on social relationships in one’s writing. In the critical book reviews, Maria, Carmen, and Ana wrote about gender and language as it is represented in books we read together in reading workshop, including *Skippyjon Jones: Lost in Spice* by Judy Schachner, *Only a Witch Can Fly* by Alison McGhee, and *Once Upon a Cool Motorcycle Dude* by Kevin O’Malley. In each of these articles, the author critiqued the use of gender roles or language by the author. Ana’s piece took up the issue of how the female character was represented in McGhee’s book, and similarly, Carmen and Maria critiqued Schachner’s use of Spanglish—a hybrid of Spanish and English used in some Texas communities—for a Mexican character in the book. Maria wrote generally in “Girls!” about representations of girls in books, but did not frame her piece as a review.

Each of the authors in these pieces stayed close to their own opinions. They commented on what they liked and were opposed to in the books, citing examples of ways the authors represented gender and language. For example, in Maria and Carmen’s co-written book review, they explained:

> We read *Lost In Spice* by Judy Schachner. Carmen and I liked this book because it’s hilarious. But we didn’t like the book because they say Mexicans are crazy. For example she [Schachner] said there was a comet full of Chihuahuas and Chihuahuas represent Mexicans and she says that “they are a comet full of crazies.” We don’t like the point of view of Judy Schachner because she says Mexicans are crazy. We didn’t like her book, but this is only our opinion. What is yours? If we were rating it one out of 5, we would have given her 2 stars.

In this piece, Maria and Carmen revoiced a discussion we had in reader’s workshop about the ways that Schachner represents Mexicans and Spanish using Spanglish and words like “crazies.” They also represented a viewpoint constructed in the discussion—a book can be funny but also represent people in ways that are unfair. The discussion in class reflected the same contradictions in students’ views of the book as Maria and Carmen communicated in this article. What was interesting was their choice to print this report in the newspaper with their authorship and point of view stamped to the article. Maria and Carmen used repetition of the word “chihuahuas” as well as the word “crazy/crazies” in this piece as linguistic tools to bring attention to those aspects of our reading workshop conversation that were important to their report. Repetition brought emphasis to the parts of the book that were worthy of critique.

When these young writers discussed social issues in their writing, their ideas did not necessarily lead to positive changes in the classroom environment. Critical literacy looked very different in this classroom than other classrooms we have read about, where students are able to use critical literacy to create more just spaces. Only a few pieces written by the students confronted what are typically thought of as critical social issues (racial oppression, gendered oppression). In these pieces, we noted the tendency for students to create binaries in their writing, inciting the reader to choose which he/she believed was the “one correct answer.” We realized that we had not worked with students to critically analyze how they were presenting social issues.

**Interpretations and Discussion**

The close analysis of three groups of articles points to the critical literacies that students drew upon to create a community that engages with the life of the classroom in ways that were specific to their identities, goals, and histories (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Students in this classroom chose to write about being a good student, a student who hates school and chose to write about critical social issues. In each case, students were deconstructing and reconstructing
discourses, or practicing critical literacy. Bakhtin’s theory of discourse allowed us to further analyze the kinds of discourses students drew upon in their writing and to identify patterns in students’ choices as writers. For example, when students wrote about being a good student, they drew on didactic discourse to teach a reader authoritative discourses of schooling, including doing homework, preparing to learn, and getting good grades. Other students challenged discourses of school by drawing on internally-persuasive discourses such as “I hate school”, engaging classmates in deconstructing social practices through choices such as humor. As students began exploring other social issues in their writing, they expanded their use of linguistic tools to present their own point of view, to engage others and to create groups who had particular perspectives on social issues. In several cases, there was evidence that the discourses students drew on in their writing became ennobled as they were taken up by classmates in subsequent articles.

Workshop approaches are often concerned with the development of voice, or an individual student’s space to compose in ways in line with his or her own identity and experiences. However, this study focuses on the public voices that are constructed when students write in a workshop. The public nature of newspaper writing engaged students in practicing critical literacy within a social space. Unlike oral conversations, newspaper articles could be crafted and reworked in particular ways over time for various reasons. Students were able to practice their positions as well as practice their strategies as writers in experimental and dialogic ways (Aukerman, 2012). In the process of composition, students positioned themselves and one another in the social world (Harre & Moghaddam, 2003) by drawing on their own voices and the voices of others— their internally-persuasive discourses (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981).

Although the majority of the pieces written by the students did not focus on politically charged issues like racial or gendered equity, we noted that practicing critical literacy does not necessarily mean that students are taking a stand related to larger, global discourses—racism, world poverty, etc.—but instead are taking a stand on issues that are important in their everyday lived experiences. We respected students’ space to compose topics of their choice because one pitfall of critical literacy teaching is that discourses important to the teacher are imposed on students, even when those topics are not relevant to students’ experiences. While we hoped that students would take the time to investigate their own positions in relation to the world around them, we recognized also the power of this locally-focused writing as a way to begin using literacy to build critical stances and practices. Because our focal students are Latino in Texas, a historically oppressed group, we found the building of critical stances in relation to local issues to be particularly important.

There are many unanswered questions that relate to both individual cases of learning as well as the collective work of the classroom. To be clear, we were not allowed to continue data collection once testing began in this school. Mr. Hernandez, in his interview, explained the ways that the practices impacted his teaching—his continuation of the newspaper to encourage writing and social action, and changes in the ways he talks with students about the books they choose from the library. However, we only spent three months in his classroom, leaving us unable to determine how the students’ literacy practices changed across the curriculum and school year. Further, we are not able to definitively say that a program such as this one would have been possible in another setting. Mr. Hernandez was part of a research team that shared views of the world and curriculum, and his students, as we have argued, were building on tools that already existed for them in their classroom life and perhaps, tools of social action they brought from their communities (González et al., 2005).
Future research might explore the possible tensions between workshop approaches and critical literacy practices in this particular classroom and classrooms like Mr. Hernandez'. For example, one area for exploration might be to look more closely at the authoritative discourses of testing and accountability in this classroom. Throughout our analysis, we raised questions about whether and how students might have the opportunity to write critically about the testing and accountability they are a part of, and in what ways the discourses of testing and accountability are both authoritative and internally persuasive for the students. In other words, what are the possibilities for the deconstruction of social practices like testing when students have spent all of their school days immersed in such practices? To answer this question, future studies might take an ethnographic approach in which the researchers immerse themselves in the life of the classroom for longer periods of time in order to examine students’ critical literacy practices within many layers of context that exist in classrooms.

**Implications**

This study illustrates the potential power of attending to students’ discursive choices as they construct voices as writers within these spaces. For teachers, we urge the creation of spaces in the workshop where writing is not only public, for example the traditional “author’s chair,” but is also focused on the classroom and school as a subject. As researchers of critical literacy, we are interested in the discursive layers of the writing produced. Again, we return to the methodology we used to examine these pieces and urge teachers to ask similar questions, such as “what are the discourses that students take up in their writing and how do they do so?” When students take up discourses in ways that are internally-persuasive, or in conversation with other discourses, we should be able to point out these events and examine with students the ways in which people initiate conversations in public about important topics.

**References**


\footnote{All names of students, the classroom teacher, and the school and community were created by the authors to protect the anonymity of the participants.}