

Relationality and emotionality: Toward a reflexive ethic in critical teaching

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Abstract

Adopting the poststructuralist and feminist perspectives, this paper attempts to examine some much-debated pertinent issues about teaching from a critical lens. Challenging the generally positivist and rationalist approach toward critical teaching, poststructuralist and feminist writers urge for careful attention to the pluralities of identities, the partial and interested nature of knowledge, and in particular the relevance of emotionality and relationality in critical praxis. Elaborating on two class interactions with new immigrant elementary students on critical analyses and reproduction of advertisements, this paper's aim is to show how the teacher and the researcher's concern for "correct" readings may overshadow the students and their own shifting desires and identities, contributing to a foreclosure of more fruitful embodied learning opportunities and a re-inscription of the authority/ignorance binaries. The study points to the need for teachers to let go of their fear of students' authentic responses and to shift their focus from imposing *certainties* to creating *possibilities* (Morgan, 2009) for *emergent understanding* and *becoming*. Problematizing critical practice in general, the paper reiterates the importance that teachers and researchers develop a *reflexive ethic* (Andreotti, 2011) not only in students but also in their own theorizing, practicing and reporting of critical teaching in the classroom.

Introduction

Critical pedagogy aims at a collective effort within educational institutions to foster a critical capacity in students both in thought and in action, assisting them to resist social inequalities of power (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1988a, 1988b; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Viewing literacy from social and cultural perspectives, scholars of New Literacies Studies (Gee, 2003, 2013; Street, 2012) and Multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2010; The New London Group, 2000) broaden traditional print-reading and writing literacy to include multimodal literacy, technical literacy, information literacy and different modes of communication (Kellner & Share, 2007). The imperative is not just to engage students in these various literacies, but also to develop children and teenagers' critical awareness of the ideological nature of cultural messages and mediatized representations that maintain and (re)produce unequal social relations regarding race, gender, and class and how these relations affect their subjectivities (Alvermann, Xu & Carpenter, 2003; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Luke, 1997; McLaren & Hammer, 1996).

Framed by the poststructuralist and feminist perspectives, this paper attempts to revisit the much debated and yet enduring concern about critical education: To what extent does it live up to its claim of emancipatory potential? Critical education espouses an underlying rationalist assumption whereby universally moral positions can be achieved through logical debates and discussions under the teacher's guidance and scaffolds (Ellsworth, 1992). However, teachers

operating from this positivist stance often fail to take into account the inherent unequal student-teacher power relations in real classroom realities and the plural and partial nature of identities and knowledge (Benesch, 2001, 2012; Gore, 1992; Luke, 1992). Poststructuralist and feminist scholars advocate for a more dialogic, fluid and open-ended approach to critical literacy and pedagogy (Buckingham, 2003; Hagood, 2002; Kellner & Share, 2007; Luke, 1997) and urge teachers and researchers to focus not just on the *content* but also the *process* of teaching, so that possibilities, constraints and contradictions as well as relations of dominance can be located and critiqued (Rogers, 2002). In response to this call, this paper, by elaborating on two class interactions on media critique and media reproduction with new immigrant students, attempts to show how the teacher and the researcher's concern for "correct" and "equitable" readings may have hindered more fruitful explorations of diverse perspectives and their plural, changing and contradictory identities. It aims to add to the body of work (e.g., Benesch, 2009, 2012; Luke, 2004; Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005; Wooldridge, 2001) that advocates for teachers' and researchers' interrogation of their practices, treating classrooms as "lived texts where relations of dominance and power can be made both recognisable and revisable" (Keddie, 2008, p. 573). In particular, it raises the significance for educators to attend to the emotionality involved in critical education, how desires and different emotional responses play out as teachers and students in growingly diverse classroom contexts negotiate and enact their multiple and developing identities. While acknowledging the paradoxical nature of critical pedagogical practices, the purpose of this paper is not to discount the importance of teaching from a critical orientation, but rather to promote a degree of humility and vigilance as we wrestle with its possibilities, complexities and limitations. It reiterates the central element of self-reflexivity in critical education (Pennycook, 1999, 2001), a "reflexive ethic" (Andreotti, 2011) to be developed not just in students but also in teachers and researchers so that they will exercise "healthy scepticism and self-criticism" (Benesch, 2001) in theorizing, practicing and reporting critical teaching in the classroom.

Theoretical Background

Identities and knowledge as plural, partial and changing

Ellsworth's (1989, 1992) provocative critique of critical pedagogy with regard to its overly optimistic claims for social emancipation and student empowerment spearheaded some healthy skepticism and heated debates about the transformative potential of critical teaching. Situated in a generally positivist and rationalist tradition, critical pedagogy argues for political engagements within the classroom through logical, rational and objective analysis in order for social injustice to be named, subjugated truths recovered and distorted knowledge reclaimed (Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Liston & Zeichner, 1987). This positivist claim to exclusive access to "truth" is heavily criticised by poststructuralist and feminist scholars (Gore, 1992; Lather, 1992, 2009; Luke, 1992; Pennycook, 2001) as it unproblematically positions the teacher as the "objective knower and interpreter" (Luke, 1997) with the ability to unveil the ideological myths embedded in different cultural forms, liberating children and youths from ideological falsity. In the case of critical media education, if one considers the fact that students, as compared to their teachers, are often more in touch with the ever-changing trends of popular culture (Lewis, 1999), assuming teachers' superior knowledge of the media is problematic. In addition, from an understanding of the Foucauldian notion of power as a network that circulates and permeates through all levels of social systems, and as enacted by individuals within the network in multifarious ways (1980), it

would be overly idealistic to claim that teachers can stand outside of existing power structures to provide students with a critical “objective” analysis. Further, with the popular media becoming more pervasive, complex, interactive and heterogeneous, consumers are becoming more sophisticated and their responses more ambivalent (Funge, 1998). In fact, audience research (Ang, 1999, 2002) has thrown light on the heterogeneous ways in which media culture is used, interacted with, interpreted, and enjoyed. Indeed, media reception often involves a process of negotiation between dominant, resistant and contested readings.

Poststructuralist and feminist notions of identity as multiple, fluid and ever-changing (Barker, 1999; Butler, 1990; Gee, 2001) further provide a more nuanced understanding that audience/readers’ interactions with cultural texts are never static or fixed; rather, they change across time and space as they negotiate their reader/audience identities across different contexts and among particular participants (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). Students’ reactions from watching a sitcom with a group of friends at home as opposed to watching it in a classroom for class discussion could be very different. Teachers operating from a structuralist and positivist stance, less aware of the inherent power differentials and partial nature of identity and knowledge, may inadvertently direct and even impose a “correct” way of reading on their students, which suppresses multiple reading positions and identities, re-inscribing the knowledge/ignorance binaries (Keddie, 2008). Approaching critical education solely through abstract deconstruction and ideological critique, teachers, despite their best intentions, could easily turn their critical teaching into a “form of language games” as students try to guess the “right” response to placate their teachers and compete for the politically correct answers that help establish their positions as “good students” (Buckingham, 2003, p. 111). By concealing their authentic responses and simply regurgitating politically correct answers, they help reproduce a powerful form of cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1979/1984) that reinforces the social hierarchies (Buckingham, 1993) and further constrains the transformative potential of critical education.

Emotions in critical pedagogy classrooms

Disrupting the Cartesian mind-body dualism, poststructuralist and feminist scholars point out that real critical ability is not just limited to formal rationality, but also the ability to draw connections between social realities and personal desires, beliefs and values (Misson & Morgan, 2006). W. Morgan (1997) illustrates this point by quoting Shor’s (1980) research conducted with a group of students at City University of New York, whom he engaged in rational discussions and analyses of hamburgers: their nutritional value, and their position in economics, politics and culture. As the study did not engage students’ exploration of the topic at an emotional level, after the investigation was completed, W. Morgan wondered if there were no students who still harboured a desire for the food and the fast-food lifestyle or derived pleasure from it in other social contexts. She argues that “[t]he inchoate and contradictory workings of our unconscious, our emotions, our desires, must be factored into any accounts of human thoughts and actions and any pedagogy” (p. 12). Similarly, Misson (1996) points out that “our subscription to certain beliefs is not just a rational or a socially-determined thing, but we invest in them because they conform to the shape of our desires” (p. 121). Using the perfume Chanel No. 5 as an example, Misson and Morgan (2006) argue that rationally we might not necessarily believe that the perfume makes us any more attractive, but the commercial affects us “aesthetically”, and draws on our aspirational desire to assume this particular fantasy. It is similar with larger emotionally-charged issues, for example those pertaining to race, religion, sexual orientation or gender.

Misson and Morgan, therefore, urge that critical literacy classrooms allow for both teachers and students to explore the emotions generated in their interaction with texts, especially those issues that push such sociopolitical buttons:

The objectifying, distancing moves may be necessary, but if that is all there is to critical literacy, and there is not a corresponding emotional understanding of why it matters if black people are depicted as overgrown children or women as passive, then it becomes a set of meaningless exercises. (p. 224)

Following the feminist theorization of emotions as corporeal experiences and socio-historical constructions, Benesch (2012) asserts that studying power and emotion in tandem will heighten the potential for critical praxis. She uses Zembylas' (2004) ethnographic study to illustrate how an elementary science teacher, Catherine, rather than maintaining a rationalist approach in the classroom, encouraged her students to express and articulate their thoughts and feelings towards their learning and the learning community, be it excitement, frustration, anxiety, or even at times shame. This more inclusive approach enabled her to attend to her own shifting emotions and those of her students, allowing her to reflect and adapt her practice accordingly. Capitalizing on this affective engagement, Catherine and her students mutually contributed to the construction of an emotionally and intellectually supportive environment where empathetic communication and understanding were developed. Challenging the assumption that emotions threaten the "disembodied, detached, and neutral knower" (2005, p. 344), Zembylas argues rather that emotions offer valid knowledge that helps guide moment-by-moment pedagogical decisions not just for students' intellectual engagements but also for their emotional, social and personal development. Benesch (2012) in reflecting on her own critical lessons on campus military recruitment in a university classroom postulates that she could have drawn out "more nuanced, felt, and embodied responses" from her students toward the presence of military recruiters on campus had she started off the discussion by asking how they *felt* rather than what they *thought* about the issue. The recruitment was targeted primarily at vulnerable new minority immigrants desiring financial security and citizenship. Benesch engaged the class in a debate about the issue, yet afterwards as she reflected, she realized this exercise forced them to take sides on this emotionally complicated issue and might have likely precluded a valuable opportunity to more deeply explore the students' complex and conflicted visceral feelings.

Because engaging students in critical discussion of intimate topics like gender, race, social stereotypes, and popular cultural enjoyments could entail strong emotions, tensions, suspicions, insecurities and contradictions, it is all the more important for teachers and researchers to engage students' emotionality, inviting them to explore their feelings to the cultural texts under study as "the first point of departure" (Probyn, 2004, p. 29) for a deeper understanding and a better self-awareness, all of which are much needed to bring about any social change (Silvers, 2001).

From relationality to a "reflexive ethic" in critical pedagogical practices and research

Agreeing with Spivak's (2004) proposal of transformative education as "an un-coercive rearrangement of desires" (p. 526), Andreotti (2011), like Benesch (2012), urges teachers to pay focused attention to the emotionality and social dynamics within critical classrooms. The cognitive engagement of critical pedagogy, as Andreotti conceives of Spivak's theorization of

critical education, has to be grounded in the level of *relationality*, that learners are respected and loved for being who they are, and are not judged or coerced into doing what is perceived as the “correct” way. This key concept of relationality echoes Albrecht-Crane’s (2005) “pedagogy as friendship” to create new possible identity positions, allowing moments when traditional teacher-student binaries could be interrupted. Benesch, endorsing pedagogical friendships, argues that such pedagogy is not to deny institutional structures altogether or to forgo some basic teacher responsibilities such as assessment or evaluation. She instead urges teachers to remain open to moments and in-between spaces where fixed structures or regulations can be momentarily disrupted to allow for unexpected and spontaneous “leakage” (Grey, 2009) of emotions to be turned into new learning possibilities. Referring back to her anti-military recruitment lessons, Benesch, as she learned to tune into her students’ emotional reactions as feedback on her teaching, realised that barring the recruiters from the campus was “misguided and infantilising” to her students. Their switching of roles, with her becoming the student, even temporarily, allowed her to shift her teaching focus from promoting the banishment of the recruiters to brainstorming with students different possible strategies they could use to deal with the recruiters’ approach. Transformative education as “an un-coercive rearrangement of desires”, as Andreotti argues, speaks to the fact that our job as teachers is to support students to develop a “reflexive ethic” that would seek not “to suggest what people ought to be, what they ought to do, what they ought to think or believe” (Foucault, 1984, p. 40, quoted in Spivak, 1995, p. 156, cited in Andreotti, 2011), but to equip learners to analyze “how social mechanisms up to now have been able to work... and then, starting from there, [leave] to the people themselves, knowing all the above, the possibility of self-determination and the choice of their own existence” (ibid).

Similarly, B. Morgan (2009) points out the importance of the creation of *possibilities* rather than *certainties* in teachers’ transformative engagements with their students, attending to “learning opportunities through which student-teachers might (re)conceptualize new roles and responsibilities for themselves” (p. 81). This notion of *emergent understanding* and *becoming* is reverberated by Roche (2011) who adopts a similar framework of care and self-determination when working with her young children learners as she engaged them in discussions of moral issues. In her paper, she reflects on how she, through critical reflection and meta-reflection, changed from a novice teacher who followed a didactic teaching style for fear of losing control to one who valued a dialogic pedagogy, honouring her young learners as co-participants and co-researchers rather than as objects to be taught. Living by her relational values and the mantra of “let[ting] the other be” (Derrida, 1978), Roche believes her job as a teacher is to explore how she can best provide contexts in which her young learners can exercise their imaginative and creative abilities as they learn to be critical thinkers. Since embracing uncertainties, contradictions and contingencies in critical classrooms is never easy, it is by attending to the micro-level moment-by-moment interactions where shifting emotions, desires and identities are negotiated, made and re-made, that unexpected opportunities might be recognized, opening up new possibilities of becoming. Critical scholars who adopt the poststructuralist and feminist notion of uncoercive knowledge production advocate for ongoing genuine efforts in critical reflection of one’s teaching/research practice, which includes one’s knowledge, beliefs, values, and positionalities as well as the analytic tools and procedures used in research and teaching purposes (Buckingham, 2003; Lather, 2009; Luke, 2004; Morgan, 2009). This form of “problematizing practice”, as Pennycook (2010) calls it, is a key component for any sophisticated form of critical language education/research.

Responding to this goal, this paper aims to show how the researcher and the collaborating teacher's concerns for certainties and "correct" reading through explicit and/or implicit prescriptive liberatory pedagogies could reproduce relations of dominance that they set out to displace. Through a micro-ethnographic analysis (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Green & Bloome, 2005; Heath & Street, 2008) of two classroom interactions in a deconstruction and reconstruction critical media literacy activity, this paper demonstrates that inattention to the students' (and the teacher and researcher's own) shifting embodied identities and desires could foreclose more fruitful learning opportunities and hinder efforts to construct a transformative classroom.

Context and method of study

The critical media literacy project described here is part of a larger university-school collaborative research study that aimed to investigate how mobilization of students' multilingual and multimodal resources promoted students' English literacy engagement. The study, following a collaborative action research model (Grundy, 1998; Rearick & Feldman, 1999; Zeichner, 1995), involved a few classroom teachers in a culturally diverse inner-city primary school (K-5) in southern Ontario. Ms. D was one of the participating teachers; I, as a graduate student at the time, was asked to work with her in the second half of the year (January to June) to replace a fellow research assistant who was on leave. Through my 6-month weekly visit (2- 3 hours per week), I gathered ethnographic data which included detailed field notes, lesson audio-recordings, teacher and student interviews, and student work samples.

Ms. D taught a Grade 4 English Literacy Development (ELD) (Ministry of Education, 2006) class with students who came from countries where they did not have regular access to education. Each morning, these students left their regular homerooms to have English, Math and Social Studies in this ELD class and would rejoin their peers in the afternoon for mainstream instruction. There were five students in this program when we started the unit on critical media literacy. All five students were of a South Asian background coming from countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kazakhstan; four of them had been in Canada for two years and one had just arrived. Most of them already had quite a substantial level of functional English. The aim of the ELD class was to bolster their academic literacy and numeracy skills to enable them to catch up to their peers.

Building on identities of competence (Cummins & Early, 2011), Ms. D capitalized on her students' multilingual and multicultural resources in new learning. Early in the school year, Ms. D, in collaborating with the university-based researchers, engaged students in two main projects—a dual language digital story about themselves and a Social Studies research project on a Canadian province or territory. Through explicit instruction of literacy and research skills, and the integration of technology and cooperative learning methods, students gradually learned to write, illustrate and publish personal narratives and academic reports in a digital format. Upon the projects' completion, the students delivered a presentation to the school community, where they received well-deserved compliments from school administrators, school board personnel, teachers and parents. Following her students' success from these projects, from which they were showing an unprecedentedly high level of self-confidence, Ms. D and I decided to do a small unit on critical media literacy. Media literacy was part of the mainstream curriculum, and

she felt that with the appropriate scaffolds, she could engage her students' global multicultural skills, identities and resources for more creative and critical learning.

We started the critical media literacy unit in mid-March, which left us approximately three months before the end of the school year. Ms. D and I decided to focus mainly on the notion of target audience in both literary and popular cultural texts. Our goal was to enable students to see critically how the print and multimodal narratives construct messages and reader/audience positions. We began with illustrated children's books to introduce the concept of voice and perspective, which led us to analyzing different TV commercials. After learning the language and basic strategies of advertisements and examining them critically, the class moved on to the final stage of re-constructing their own advertisements. The whole class chose to re-create a commercial for the Indo-Pakistani snack, Kurkure, which was one of their favourite snacks.

Data analysis

Overall, this new critical media literacy learning experience was illuminative, enriching and positive for the teacher, me as the researcher, and the students. However, during the months I was teaching/observing the class, two episodes in particular stood out to me as moments of disjuncture in our attempts to structure students' critical learning. These two moments prompted me to reflect more deeply on the interactions between teacher/researcher and the students. Conducting a micro-ethnographic analysis, I based my study mainly on the transcripts of lesson recordings and the detailed participant-observer field notes taken throughout the research period. Adopting an *ethnographic perspective* (Green & Bloome, 2005, p. 183), the micro-analysis aims to take a focused approach to study how classroom language use structures the social and cultural dynamics of the classroom, and how certain social identities and power relations are maintained, marginalized, disrupted and/or (re)produced. Through cycles of reflective analysis, tentative codes were identified, then merged and reformulated into broad categories from which overarching themes emerged (Creswell, 2007, p. 152). The data under analysis were mapped onto other sets of data (teacher and student interviews, student work samples) of the larger study in order to obtain a rich, holistic understanding of the present analysis.

Vignette 1: You stole the idea in my head!

The students' response toward this unit on critical media literacy had up to this point been enthusiastic and positive. They were filled with excitement, especially when they knew they would be working on a product they all loved—Kurkure. I brought in some Kurkure from a local store so the students could examine the packaging. A week before, the students had discussed two Hershey's chocolate commercials from which they identified specifically how the visual and the narrative texts targeted different audiences. As they were familiar with Kurkure, they now had many ideas to share. Building on what they had learned from our prior discussion on the Hershey's commercials, Ms. D first had students examine the textual narrative on Kurkure's packaging. She drew their attention to the names of different flavours (for example, "Masala Munch", or "Hyderabadi Hungama") and asked the class what particularities they noticed. Ghazala promptly raised her hand and said, "*They are written in English but they sound like Urdu....so that the adults think maybe this is from the Urdu people... they made it.*" Ghazala was quick to see how the Romanized Urdu words added to the cultural authenticity of the product.

Ms. D went on to guide students to see how the use of alliteration (/m/ & /h/) made the names of the flavours more memorable. The students also noticed that one of the packages had the words “Tea-time Value Pack” printed on it, which they thought obviously targeted adults because to them only adults have tea time. Their answer showed their awareness of the concept of target audience. When we moved onto the visual narrative of the packaging, students talked about the use of colours and Abbas shared with the class that back home he had seen Kurkure bags bearing photos of a famous Hindi actor eating the product. This sparked a long discussion on celebrity advertising. Here is an excerpt of the discussion:

Ms. D: *Should I buy something just because a good actor is buying it?*

Samira: *No, because it is your choice if you want it. If you want spicy thing, you can buy Kurkure, but if you don't like spicy things, you can buy Hershey.*

Ms. D: *Let's say if I saw...*

Samira: *Queen Elizabeth.*

Ms. D: *Okay, Queen Elizabeth's wearing this nice, beautiful dress and I saw [Author] wearing something look almost exactly the same. Should I choose what the Queen is wearing or what [Author] is wearing? I want to hear your thought. Would you choose the one [Author] is wearing, or it doesn't matter?...*

Yalda: *[Author].*

Ghazala: *Queen Elizabeth. Because she is a queen, and queen dresses more beautiful than the others.*

Ms. D: *And you will buy the one exactly the same?*

Ghazala: *Sometimes you won't care about it. You buy because it is cheap.*

Samira: *It doesn't matter because... if [Author] likes her own clothes, if Queen Elizabeth likes hers, and if you don't know what to wear, you just go with what you like.*

Ms. D: *You just stole the idea in my head...*

Here Ms. D was trying to get her students to understand how easily we can fall prey to the celebrity effect and consume irrationally. She asked if one should purchase a product simply because a celebrity endorses it. Samira promptly gave a negative reply, arguing that we should exercise our own choice and not blindly follow the celebrity by using the example that if we like spicy snacks, we can choose Kurkure, and if we do not, we can choose something else, like Hershey's. To ensure that all students understood her question, Ms. D went on to give an example of a celebrity to expand her argument. Samira suggested using Queen Elizabeth as an example, and Ms. D went along with the suggestion. She also included me in her examples as a contrast to a celebrity so students could easily understand the difference between a famous person and a “regular” person who worked with them in the classroom. Ms. D opened up the

discussion and invited students to share their opinions as to whether they would follow the Queen's choice or the researcher's, or whether these people's choices did not matter to them. While Yalda said she would choose what the researcher wore, Ghazala candidly admitted that she would choose what the Queen wore because the Queen's clothes would naturally be more beautiful than the others'. When asked whether she would then buy the exact same clothes, again she frankly replied that sometimes our choices are really based on how affordable the products are—*"Sometimes you won't care about it. You buy because it is cheap."* This answer, nonetheless, was not what Ms. D was looking for. Samira picked up the discussion using the same logic she shared before: Our decisions should be based on our personal preferences and not be swayed by other people's choices, celebrity or not. Ms. D complimented Samira by saying, *"You just stole the idea in my head!"* as Samira articulated Ms. D's viewpoint.

Discussion

The discussion started with Ms. D's close-ended question, *"Should I buy something just because a good actor is buying it?"* Following the dialogue to the end, we can conclude that her intention was to get the students to say "no" to the question. The use of the modal verb "should" indicated Ms. D's concern with what she perceived to be the right behaviour, rather than an interest in how students authentically reacted to the celebrity effect. For example, Ghazala's responses to Ms. D's two questions were either glossed over or went unnoticed. Ghazala's honest admittance to her liking of the royal apparel reflected a common desire for glamour and beauty shared amongst not just children but also adults. Yet there was a mismatch between her stance and the teacher's preferred answer, which was revealed later in the discussion. I wondered whether the teacher's recognition of Ghazala's emotional investments in princess stories and fashion glamour would have actually opened up a safe space for further honest discussions about how the students consume--what affects their decisions, and how these choices might differ for different products or under different circumstances. A few weeks after this lesson, I was invited to attend the graduation assembly. The fifth graders marched into the hall one by one, almost all of them dressed up, with boys in tuxedos or suits, and girls in tight flashy gowns with salon hairdos and full make-up. While it was endearing to see them taking the event so seriously, I could not help but think of the great social and peer pressure these students were under to conform to a certain look that was seen as "appropriate" for the occasion. How I wished we could have linked our class discussions to something more real and relevant to them, and not just have been satisfied with some skin-deep "correct" answers. Ghazala's candid response that sometimes it was more of a matter of affordability (*"You buy because it is cheap."*) reflected that she was definitely not a mindless child slavishly following fashion trends. Yet it is important that we be cautious of the overly optimistic discourse of agency (Bauman, 2000). While Samira's answer, that one should exercise one's rational choices and not be influenced by celebrities nor any other people, reflected the teacher's preferred reading, it ignored the social basis of any "individual" choice. With the complex and pervasive nature of the fashion industry, any clothing item made available in the market is inescapably pre-determined by the industry. The symbolic value of any fashion design or look is over-determined by the existing matrix of signs and codes of consumer value (Baudrillard, 1970/1998). The implication of this is, given the media-saturated nature of present society, the notion of "individual" choice is becoming more illusive. Unfortunately, however, these complexities of the debate about agency versus media influence were absent in the teacher-student dialogue shown above. Ms. D's reductive approach reflected her possible concern that the students would not be able to handle the complexities in the

argument, or perhaps she simply lacked an understanding of such complexities. Nonetheless, her desire to have the class arrive at a consensus over the perceived ideological impact of the celebrity effect in advertisements was evident. In guiding her students' discussions, Ms. D inadvertently nudged the class to agree with her pre-approved position, hence missing a valuable opportunity to engage them in more critical explorations of their own consumption choices and their complex emotions about the media culture.

Vignette 2: But we are from Pakistan!

Following the critical analysis of Kukure's advertisement strategies, the students were divided into two groups to work on a re-construction and re-production of a TV commercial for the product. To add to the feeling of authenticity, the commercial was to be videotaped and would then be screened for the class. Samira was excited about the storyboard her group had come up with, and she proudly summarised it for me as I listened in on their group discussion:

[The story] is about this white boy [who] is Canadian and he wants to know what food is the spiciest and he wants to taste it. And he has friends who are from Pakistan. And we met and he'd be asking us about our food because we come from Pakistan, and we say we know Biryani and they made it good in Pakistan. But we have something that is in Canada and is spicy. And it's KURKURE!

After listening to Samira's summary of her group's storyboard, while I appreciated the group's keen interest and effort, their ascribing the white boy as Canadian, hence setting themselves apart as non-Canadian, was worrisome for me enough to overshadow my appreciation of their honest approach to the assignment. As a visible minority and a critical educator, I believed it was imperative to provide alternative insight toward this potentially damaging viewpoint. Ms. D had told me earlier that many of her students and their parents subscribed to the dominant social constructions of Canadian identities and initially had problems recognising her as the "real" Canadian teacher because she was herself South Asian and wore a hijab. In light of this, I asked for clarification about the choice of "the white Canadian boy" in their advertisement, to which Samira curtly responded, "*I never said that!*" Her defensive tone took me by surprise. Perhaps she already sensed my question as a form of criticism about their work. I re-posed the question, "*Okay, but in your mind what does this boy look like?*" She replied, "*He is white*". I felt I had to intervene there to give them an alternative perspective:

Author: *Are all Canadian boys white?*

Malik: *Sure.*

Yalda: *Sometimes they are.*

Samira: *Not all of them...Some of them are black.*

Author: *If you see this commercial, what is it telling you?*

Samira: *Oh, yeah. It doesn't matter whichever country you are from, 'cause he is Canadian, and we are Pakistan...*

Author: *But you are also Canadian, aren't you?*

Samira: *No, I'm from a different country.*

Author: *Yes, but now you are in this country. You are living in this country. You are a citizen here. You are Canadian too.*

Samira: *No, no. The thing is that he is Canadian and we are Canadian too, but we are from Pakistan. So he's coming to ask us because we know ... so it doesn't matter if he is different, that we are from different country, we can still live together and ask each other questions.*

When asked if all Canadian boys are white, the students' answers were varied. Yalda said, "Sometimes they are", but it was not clear what she really meant. Malik's answer (that all Canadian boys were white) and Samira's ("Not all of them... Some of them are black."), though different, reflected nonetheless a similar belief that they did not consider themselves Canadian. Feeling the urge to challenge this hegemonic view of racial minorities, I attempted to appeal to their status as Canadian citizens to help them disrupt the *us-them* divide. However, Samira resisted by saying, "No, I'm from a different country". I made another attempt and reiterated their citizenship right. She finally conceded, agreeing that she was also Canadian, but what she wanted to emphasize was her Pakistani ethnic identity which gave her an "insider's" knowledge of the spiciest snack that she could share with this white Canadian boy (the "outsider"). At this point, Ms. D came over and joined our discussion. Obviously sharing the same worry as I did, she reminded the group that Canadians are not just people from Europe and, referring to what they had learnt in the assembly earlier that morning, that only the aboriginals were indigenous to this land. She asked the group to re-think what the target audience of their advertisement was:

Ms. D: *Do you want everybody to buy it or just the white people?*

Author: *If you want everybody to buy it, instead of just one white boy, you can have three children...*

Samira: *We don't have three children...*

Author: *You can have one Chinese girl, one...*

Samira: *We don't have it... If you are going to tape us, how are we supposed to know?*

Author: *Oh, you mean...*

Samira: *Yeah...if you are going to tape us, how are we going to do it?*

Ms. D: *Maybe you can dress up.*

Samira: *How am I supposed to know? (yelling impatiently)*

Ms. D: *How do you know how people look like in England? What do you do?*

Malik: *Computer.*

Samira: *Ah... I'm tired. I am thinking of the whole thing. What ideas do you give me? (talking to her group members)*

In order to disrupt the dominant view of Canadians as purely Caucasian, I suggested that the group could have three children from different ethnic backgrounds, instead of just one white boy. Samira immediately raised some technical concerns. First, there were only three of them in the group—one as the narrator who would introduce and comment on the product, while the other two were the potential customers. Second, she questioned how they could portray and represent, for example, a Chinese girl, in a way that is “realistic” enough so the viewers would know whom they were re-presenting in the video. Ms. D, sensing Samira’s impatience, reminded the group that they could do some independent research online to learn how certain social groups of people behave or what they look like. Feeling more frustrated about the idea of doing more work, Samira exclaimed that she was too tired to work now and blamed her teammates of not helping her in the thinking process. Realizing that Samira might have felt she was the target of criticism, I quickly wrapped up the discussion and invited the group to have a final decision on their target audience and get ready for the videotaping.

Discussion

In hindsight, my suggestion of using three ethnically diverse children (instead of just one white boy) did pose unnecessary technical difficulties for the group because there were only three of them. What I found most troubling, however, was my and Ms. D’s compulsion to “correct” Samira and her group members’ views on their Canadian identity. First of all, while attempting to scaffold Samira’s understanding of the Othering discourse of immigrant identity, we were unknowingly exerting pressure on her (and her group members) to embrace her new Canadian identity. Even though Samira finally came to agree that her Canadian and Pakistani identities should not be an either-or division, it was not clear whether such an understanding had already existed but she was unable to articulate it until then, or that she was simply striking a tenuous accord so as to avoid my persistent badgering. Judging from her inconsistent answer earlier about who Canadians were, it was quite likely that she was still wrestling with her new Canadian identity, at least on the affective level. She seemed to be more comfortable in identifying herself as Pakistani and quite probably felt proud to invoke her ethnic identity in this situation as she obviously believed that she had the necessary cultural knowledge to guide her white peer the spiciest food choice. One common advertising strategy is to have an expert giving authoritative information or testimony about the product so as to add legitimacy and authenticity to the message. Most likely, Samira was using her out-of-school media knowledge to construct this advertisement—dichotomizing the differences between the cultural expert/insider and the lay person/outsider to increase the persuasive power. On some level, these strategies should be challenged and problematized as they (re)produce possible discriminatory discursive constructions of different social groups. But as critical pedagogues, both Ms. D and I felt such strong need to “correct” the students’ understanding and to “redeem” them from the dictates of the dominant discourse, we failed to recognize our own emotions and those of the students. Had we identified our “agenda-ed” approach we could have worked with the differing views, thus allowing for in-between spaces wherein students could have reflected on different possible

identity options. The students may have come to understand intellectually why the term “Canadian” should not exclude and preclude racial minorities, but their personal affective identification with such a narrative could be a totally different matter. I wonder whether the discussion would have been more fruitful had we engaged them in discussing how they identify themselves across space and time, and how they *feel* about these positions as a first point of departure to deeper explorations of their developing hybrid identities. Do they see themselves more as Canadian or Pakistani, or a mix of both depending on where they are (e.g., ELD classroom, playground, home, or larger community) and whom they are with (e.g., with their fellow ELD classmates, or homeroom classmates and teachers, or family)? What are some of the deciding factors affecting their perception of themselves? Reflecting on the lesson, I found the conversations to be generally close-ended, guided with mostly yes-no questions. There was no attempt to brainstorm how they would represent a more diverse target audience or whether it was their goal. What criteria would they use to decide which social groups should be included--ethnicity, language backgrounds, or other criteria as well as gender and age? What are the pros and cons for each criterion and choice? Further, the suggestion of researching online how other ethnic groups look or act was beside the point. Samira’s group would have run into the same problem if they had represented a white boy or a Chinese girl in their advertisement. How would a South Asian child portray a white boy or a Chinese girl in a way that s/he is recognisable as such by the viewers? This effort would certainly involve a degree of essentialization of certain stereotypical features, behaviours or customs associated with that particular social group. The idea that doing more research as suggested by Ms. D perhaps just reflected a lack of understanding of the complexities of mediatized social representations and a simplistic belief that a resistant reading and reconstruction could itself be free from any ideological discursive constructions.

On close examination of our dialogue, I realized that Ms. D and I guided questions based on our desire driven by our overarching agenda of converting students to adopting a resistant view toward the Canadian discourse rather than by the need for students to explore what and why they think and feel in certain situations in order that they can begin to question and inquire possible alternatives for what they can do differently. In pushing forward a resistant stance, Ms. D and I re-inscribed a simplistic binary perspective of ethnic identity (i.e., Canadians are either white or multicultural) and neglected how multi-layered the notion of identity can be (Norton, 2000), and how it is constantly changing--created and recreated in our interaction with people and with the collective discourses around us (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) as we inhabit and/or resist those discursive practices. Sometimes a subordinated group might deliberately choose to construct certain radicalized qualities in positive terms for themselves in order to gain affirmation of their identity (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Lin, 2008). The strategy that Samira’s group used in their advertisement could be seen as a kind of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak, 1988) in order to position themselves as the more knowledgeable cultural informant to share their expert knowledge with their white target audience. If this is where they were in terms of self-identity, could we have better put aside the imperative to have them adopt a perceived “right” viewpoint, and instead explored with them the reasons behind their thinking and design, whether theirs was the only best advertising strategy?

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the unit, the students did put up their dramatic skits and were videotaped. They were proud and excited about their productions. In the final interview, Ms. D showed great appreciation that her ELD students had the opportunity to do something different—working with technology, analyzing and re-constructing their media texts. She was especially happy to see how the different literacy activities deepened students' literacy engagement:

... my students are more engaged in literacy now. They want to read more; they are always asking to write because their writing has an audience. It wasn't just write and we tuck it away.

Ms. D and I, however, were only able to engage in very short conversations after the two lessons described above. As a young researcher at the time, I felt uncomfortable asserting my pedagogical views in her classroom and worried she might not take my feedback as positive. However, in hindsight I feel I missed a valuable opportunity to create an open dialogue through which we could have examined more fully our pedagogy. Laying out the mis-steps that a teacher and a researcher can make in doing critical work, this paper is designed to open up a space among teachers and researchers for reflective practice and genuine inquiry into a more ethical pedagogy of critical education.

The two vignettes described above show how the teacher and researcher's concern for students' intellectual understanding ultimately took precedence over the provision of a space for students' exploration of their emotional and affective investments in different social and cultural identities and engagements. The fear of losing control of students' unexpected responses was evident in both the teacher and the researcher's approach to the lessons. Worrying that these young new immigrant students would fall prey to the media machine and the prevailing Othering discourse of visible minorities, we nudged them to a resistant view that might not have helped them to understand their complex emotions and changing identities, and make meaningful connections to their rational beliefs (Misson & Morgan, 2006). When we disregarded our own and students' "leakage" (Grey, 2009) of shifting desires, we missed a valuable point of departure for deeper explorations of possibilities for (re)conceptualization of our changing identities. The limited and limiting discussion process re-inscribed the authority and knowledge hierarchies that these critical literacy lessons sought to disrupt.

To allow for more fruitful critical learning, students' different individual responses and emotional reactions should be the starting point for further embodied engagements and reflections. The reflexive ethic, as Andreotti (2011) proposes, is to remind teachers of the uncoercive nature of democratic education and the need to work alongside students as friends, knowing that our effort is to *support* rather than *determine* social choices that might help shift the existing patterns of power. This is definitely not an easy task for critical pedagogues whose intention is to promote a critical understanding of how different social mechanisms maintain and (re)produce unequal power relations. Further, shifting the pedagogical focus from *certainties* to *possibilities* (Morgan, 2009) could be daunting as it goes against the traditional authoritative educational impulse to "teach" and to reap instant results. The reflexive ethic as the guiding principle for teachers and researchers points to a moral imperative to remain more open and vigilant to the micro-processes through which relations of dominance could be recognised and moments of

possibilities opened. If pedagogues maintain a healthy tension between attempts at transformative engagements and the scrutiny of the positionalities, processes and desires that go with such attempts, the transformative potential becomes more possible.

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