

# A Self-Study: Facilitating an Early Childhood Critical Literacy Junk Art Club with Preservice Teachers

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*Education is the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 1997, p.34)*

In this self-study, I Angela, a white female middle-aged teacher educator examined my practice as I co-constructed a junk art critical literacy club (JAC) for kindergarten, first, and second graders with three undergraduate female preservice teachers, Rose, Dory, and Bianca. The three women are all under the age of 35. Rose and Dory are Hispanic and Bianca is Hispanic and White. All three women had taken part in a critical literacy workshop where they had worked to unpack their relationship with literacy and power. The JAC was an opportunity for them to build upon their new understandings.

Together, we planned and enacted junk art activities that provided students the opportunity to reconsider messages they receive from written and visual texts. Our work together consisted of an initial planning meeting where we created a goal and lesson plans, six club sessions as well as weekly planning and debriefing meetings. During each club session, we worked together to introduce the topic and support children as they created and shared their art. I used varied techniques to support the preservice teachers. I engaged in the planning and enacting of the JAC, role modeled, asked scaffolding questions, provided feedback, and took part in reflective group discussions. We decided to use junk art because it provided the students with a medium to create and express their emotions and understanding of self. Junk Art is the process of creating three-dimensional art by using varied repurposed materials (Junk art, n.d.) The purpose of the study was to examine my practice as I facilitated the preservice teachers during the co-planning and co-constructing of the JAC.

## Aim/Objectives

In my self-study, I address the following questions: What happens when I, an early childhood teacher educator, co-construct and co-teach a critical literacy junk art club with 3 preservice teachers with kindergarten, first, and second graders and how does facilitating the JAC help me grow as a critical literacy teacher educator?

## Theoretical Framework

Critical literacy was the guiding framework for the study. Critical literacy is more than reading traditional written words; it entails examining all kinds of texts such as advertisements (Harste, 2014) to understand how power is constructed and manifested in society (Freire, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Messages in texts can be used to oppress or liberate

people (Freire, 1985; Mosley, 2010). The ability to look at texts through a critical lens is paramount in our society, which is filled with unheard voices, stereotypes, and inequities that are embedded into the framework of the culture (Arthur, 2001).

Teacher educators have found preparing preservice teachers to enact critical literacy has been fraught with challenges (Wolfe, 2010). Self-study research provides critical literacy teacher educators the opportunity to investigate problems they face in their practice (Nilsson & Loughran, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative that teacher educators utilize self-study methodology to develop their practice and add to the literature which is sparse. Skerrett through her self-study theorized teacher educators need to facilitate preservice teachers' looking at the tensions they face while enacting critical literacy and give preservice teacher's the opportunity to construct and teach critical literacy with teacher educator support (2010). The study detailed below moves past a teacher educator facilitating as an observer and examines the teacher educator's practice as an active participant.

## Methods

Conducting a self-study is an integral part of being an effective educator because it provides an opportunity to engage in a systematic inquiry into my practice (Berry, 2007). This process requires reflection, collaborative dialogue with a "critical friend" (Whitehead, 1989), and the ability to critique one's practice (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). In this self-study, I hoped to examine my practice as I facilitated the JAC.

The data consisted of my field notes, planning documents, my journals, preservice teachers' journals, my correspondences with my critical friend, transcriptions from planning, debriefing, and club meetings, and artifacts from the club sessions. I analyzed the data using the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I created open codes, closed codes, and themes and discussed them with my critical friend. The constant comparative method is the process of finding and identifying patterns in the data. Through the coding process, I was documented my experience in the JAC (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I triangulated the data and corresponded with my critical friend to ensure trustworthiness of the findings.

## Outcomes

Through a systematic inquiry (Berry, 2007) and collaboration with my critical friend (Whitehead, 1989), I reflected upon my practice as I co-constructed the JAC. I found I had to move past my rigid definition of critical literacy and broaden my understanding to accommodate the ways in which my preservice teachers took on a critically literate stance. I also realized I needed to be comfortable struggling with my emotions surrounding my professional identity when I was vulnerable with my preservice teachers.

### *Broadening my Understanding of Critical Literacy*

I entered the JAC with a specific understanding of critical literacy. The components I considered essential were critical literacy is central to empowerment, involves the unpacking of privilege, and focuses on developing social responsibility; literacy is embedded with political power and never neutral; and critical literacy demands readers interrogate the text and read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Providing scaffolding for the preservice teachers and analyzing the data caused me to reconsider and expand my understanding of critical literacy.

For example, Rose, during the creation of the goal for the JAC, shared children should leave the JAC with an "open-mind and creative thinking" (Initial Planning Meeting Transcript, October 2107) and see "literacy with an imagination not just how they are taught to see it" (Initial Planning Meeting Transcript, October 2107). My initial reaction to this was Rose is confused. I did not understand how having an open mind, thinking creatively, and using your imagination were tenets of critical literacy. In my journal I wrote, "She seemed confused when creating the prior knowledge chart. Her words were sometimes on target but then she seemed to get lost when she was talking about having an imagination and being creative" (My Journal, October 2017). I was fixated on my understanding.

However, in retrospect, as I coded and discussed the data with my critical friend, I realized Rose shared a profound perspective of critical literacy. She articulated the connection between having an imagination and how it applied to thinking critically about literacy. Her ideas led me to re-look at Greene's work (1988) and the concept of social imagination. The social imagination is the process of envisioning an alternate reality where the current social injustices in society do not exist. It is through imagining one can read texts differently and begin to see a society where the current status quo no longer exists and rather creates ways it can be different. I also discovered Rose's understanding of the importance of having an open mind when interacting with literature describes the process of looking at texts and seeing multiple possibilities when making meaning.

Scaffolding Dory also brought me to another important discovery: becoming critically literate can be an emotional journey. When I was scaffolding her and recording her experiences during the JAC, I did so with a limited lens. I looked at her journey as one of misunderstanding the concept because she only focused on her emotional journey. I was initially under the assumption her emotional experience was not connected to critical literacy as I wrote:

*Dory seems to have gone through an emotional experience. Throughout the club she talked about social justice issues with the group that she was not comfortable sharing with other people. Yet she did not seem to grasp the concept of critical literacy. I wonder, if by investigating her emotions concerning social justice issues, could she be becoming ready to think about critical literacy (My Journal, October 2017).*

I looked at her emotions as an important part of her journey. Yet, I did not connect her feelings to her learning and developing an understanding of critical literacy. Emotions have long been looked up as separate from cognitive learning. They have been seen as a barrier to developing reasoning or a cognitive understanding (Winans, 2012). Emotions, however, are a different way of knowing one's self and the world we live (Dirkx, 2008). I learned the importance of emotions as a learning tool.

In retrospect, I realize Dory and Rose facilitated my growth as a critical literacy educator by broadening my understanding of critical literacy, and my role as a teacher educator. Through the facilitating process, I learned when co-constructing, I needed to be open to new perspectives.

## *Identity Crisis*

Facilitating the JAC brought feelings of insecurity. I struggled with my teacher educator identity. My insecurity was connected to one specific event from the planning meeting, the discussion concerning how to start the first JAC session. We discussed whether or not to use an example in the introduction.

*Rose: Tell them an example. I consider myself Spanish, Brown, I like swimming. Things that represent themselves.*

*Angela: So, we should give an example. Rose: yeah.*

*Dory: We could show them a visual? Bianca: A drawing of ourselves.*

*Angela: We need to be careful about bringing in our art because it will be more advanced. Children could feel intimidated.*

*Dory: Oh yeah.*

*Rose: My art is terrible already. They will be better than I am. Everyone laughed*

*Angela: Funny, but it is something to think about. If we give them words or show them a picture, we might lead them.*

*Bianca: We can help them brainstorm their own words. (JAC Planning Meeting Transcription, October 2017)*

The conversation, detailed above, was revisited numerous times throughout the JAC. Although in the conversation, I pointed out the need to allow the children to create their own understanding of self, it was looked up as my decision to not include an introduction. The catalyst for the group's focus on the discussion was the first JAC. The goal for the first JAC was as Bianca stated, "Our goal is to see what these children are thinking of themselves and how they perceive themselves" (JAC Planning Meeting Transcription, October 2017).

## Figure 1

*Self Portrait (October 2017)*



The students all created representations of themselves but were silent when we asked them to share words that described them. Victoria, a five year old girl, created the self-portrait in Figure 1. She shared with the group that "I have long hair. I like rainbows and cupcakes" (JAC Session 1 Transcript, October 2017). She was thinking about what she likes and characteristics of herself such as her long hair. Although the students were creating self-portraits, the preservice teachers' consensus was the first meeting was not successful. In the first post JAC discussion, the preservice teachers shared their feelings.

*Angela: How do you think it went? What went well and what could we have done differently?*

*Rose: Give examples. Describe what we like. Because they missed the whole concept. Dory: It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be.*

*Rose: I knew it would be hard. Bianca: We need to explain more.*

*Rose: They didn't get it. We need visuals. (Post JAC Session 1, October 2017)*

I internalized the preservice teachers' reflections on the first meeting and felt our first JAC session was a failure. I reflected on this in my journal:

*I felt overwhelmed by the fact it didn't start well. I started to question if I can do this. I felt everyone thought it went badly because I suggested we don't use a model. My reasoning was I didn't want to lead the children. I wanted them to think. I believe that is still valid but now I am second-guessing myself. (My Journal, September 2017)*

The decision not to provide a model came up repeatedly throughout the JAC. The preservice teacher mentioned it in every post JAC discussion meeting. Rose shared, "they are getting the concept because we have an introduction. See" (Post JAC Discussion Session 2 October 2017). Bianca also voiced her thoughts "it worked much better when we had the introduction. Let's make sure we do it again" (Post JAC Discussion Session 3, October 2017). Dory shared with the group, "They got it. They needed the visuals" (Post JAC Discussion Session 4, November 2017). The preservice teachers

were able to internalize the importance of using a solid introduction to create a comprehensive lesson. However, I found the subject hard to discuss.

The focus on the decision left me feeling insecure in my role as a teacher educator; a role in which I feel comfortable. I was willing to take responsibility for the decision numerous times. After the first JAC session, I told the group "I think you are right. It would have been helpful to provide them with an example or more of an introduction" (Post JAC Discussion Session 1, October 2017). I knew it was important to take responsibility but it left me feeling insecure.

In those moments when I was feeling insecure, I fought the internal battle to continue to co-construct the lesson. Yet through my insecurities, I lost sight of the purpose of the JAC and was focused on my need to appear competent. In my mind, I was holding myself accountable to the traditional role of the teacher educator, the person who had all the answers. It was only after the JAC that I was able to look at my feelings through a different lens. I realized the importance of not only co-constructing the instruction with my preservice teachers but also the teacher educator being allowed to be fallible.

I was comfortable with the preservice teachers struggling and learning. It was when the focus was on me that I felt overwhelmed. I struggled with the perceived flaw in my professional identity. I needed to internalize the importance of the students being active in the process and the possibility of being fallible. I needed to grow as a teacher educator so I could fully engage in the process of co-construction.

I cannot help but wonder if in order to co-construct with preservice teachers does the teacher educator need to be comfortable being fallible in front of the preservice teachers or will the teacher educator always struggle with the process of being fallible? Although I can verbalize the importance of co-constructing, I found it hard to break out of the normalized expectations of the teacher educator; the person who is all-knowing.

The process of struggling and admitting my perceived failure was a turning point for the preservice teachers. It was in that moment that the preservice teachers were claiming a seat at the table as educators. They were using their voices to express their understanding of teaching. Following the conversation, the preservice teachers were more active in the planning meeting. At the time, I did not understand the preservice teachers' need to claim a spot. I was immersed in my own feelings of self-doubt. This lasted throughout the entire JAC: "I felt uncomfortable when the introduction of the material was brought up. It wasn't discussed in depth but it made me feel insecure about my teaching. I felt vulnerable" (My Journal, October 2017). I was feeling very insecure in my identity as a teacher educator. This continued throughout the entire JAC. After the last session I wrote in my journal:

*Is it bad to say I am tired of talking about the first planning and club meeting in every planning session? Rose brought it up again. Yet at the same time, she also talked about not leading students. It made me think it was more about asserting themselves than honing in on a big mistake I made. (My Journal, December 2018)*

I realized in retrospect I was comfortable with the preservice teachers being in the process of becoming critical literacy educators only when they deemed my contribution a success.

My need to be considered competent was clear during the planning meeting for the third JAC planning meeting. I suggested using kids-like-us dolls to introduce the topic. Kids-like-us dolls are dolls, which are used to help teachers do social justice work with children. The dolls are given a persona and are used to tell a story. An example of a story is: I am sad because children are making fun of me because of my skin color. The teacher will then facilitate the conversation with the children as they work towards providing suggestions and support to the doll. The activity helps children develop empathy, become advocates for social justice, and learn how to stand up for themselves (Whitney, 2002).

After the third and fourth sessions where we used the dolls as an introduction, the preservice teachers were excited about the success of the activity.

## Figure 2

*Tiffany the Doll (October 2017)*



We used the doll, Tiffany, as seen in Figure 2 in the third and fourth sessions. The story we told was Tiffany went shopping with her mother and wanted a sugary cereal because it had a prize inside. After the session, the preservice teachers shared their thoughts during the post JAC meeting.

*Dory: Using the story helped. I think they got it. Angela: I think they did. What did you think?*

*Bianca: I did. They go grocery shopping and they can relate to baby Tiffany (the doll). They go down the aisles and picking things they want and they can relate to not getting. (Post JAC Discussion Session 4, November 2017)*

The doll, Tiffany, in the fourth session was used to tell a story of a girl who wanted to get a toy in the toy store but her mother told her it was for boys. The doll started to cry. The children were able to problematize the doll's experience. During the post sessions, the preservice shared their thoughts,

*Rose: They are getting the concept of it. When I was doing the power point and the doll with them, I didn't even have to ask the questions were liked boom.*

*Dory: The doll helped. Angela: I agree.*

*Bianca: The doll helped the kids connect to the concept. (Post JAC Discussion Session 4, November 2017)*

The use of the dolls facilitated the children connecting to the activities in a deeper way. It also provided me with a sense of security in my role as a teacher educator. In my journal, I wrote "the preservice teachers were excited about the doll story today. It made me feel good to see how the doll story helped the children" (My Journal, October 2017). My expression of feeling good reflects my need to move past my deemed failure and gain a sense of balance in my role as a teacher educator. It was my way of reclaiming my professional identity and feeling competent. However, I needed to let go of the traditional role of the teacher educator as the person with all the answers and realize the importance of co-constructing both in practice and emotionally.

During the planning of the fifth JAC session, the preservice teachers brought up the topic of the first session again and in the conversation, I used the doll idea to change the subject and to redeem myself in their eyes. The following conversation occurred:

*Angela: I think Rose's idea really made a lot of sense. In the beginning we did not give them enough of an example.*

*Rose: Yeah.*

*Angela: Okay yes you are right.*

*Rose: My education courses are coming together (Bianca laughs.). I am learning a lot. Angela: They really are.*

*Rose: Yeah, I know.*

*Angela: You should be proud of that but I think then bringing the doll makes it so real to them.*

*(Planning Meeting JAC Session 5, November 2017)*

In this conversation, I was not only acknowledging the importance of Rose's contribution I was also trying to regain my footing. By saying "you should be proud of that but I think then bringing the dolls makes it so real" (Planning Meeting JAC Session 5, November 2017), I was trying to taking ownership of a successful idea and therefore, reclaiming my status as a competent teacher educator. This revelation, upon reflection, can be framed as somewhat problematic because instead of dedicating myself to the process I was struggling with my need to feel competent.

As I reflect on the experience, I realize the importance of the preservice teachers finding their voices in the JAC. I also think my focus on the initial JAC session was my personal struggle. The preservice teachers discovering the importance of using visuals to make the activity accessible to the children is an important educational strategy. They also learned it takes multiple exposures for the students to begin to think critically about literacy. It is the process of planting a seed. It was my insecurity that stopped me from being able to see the value in it and focus on my vulnerability as a teacher educator. Even though my contribution to using the doll stories was highly valued by the preservice teachers, I was not able to completely feel secure in my role. In retrospect, feeling insecure is part of the process of engaging in a new challenge, and in order to truly co-construct, I need to not only process my insecure feelings but realize the importance of them and how they contribute to my development as a teacher educator. I have begun to consider the importance of not only of vulnerability but also of processing those feelings. Although I connected with my critical friend, I did not choose to share my feelings of vulnerability. I have learned although I struggle with vulnerability it is an important part of the process but not just acknowledging it but also working through it is essential to my development as a teacher educator.

## Conclusion

My journey to becoming a critical teacher educator was twofold. First, I struggled with vulnerability. I learned that my vulnerability was essential to the preservice teachers' learning how to enact critical literacy in the JAC and part of the process. It was essential that I processed those feelings of vulnerability so I could continue to grow as a teacher educator.

Second, I struggled as I initially deemed Rose and Dory's contributions to the JAC as falling short of my rigid definition of critical literacy. Looking back and reconsidering their contributions I realized in order to be a critical literacy teacher educator, I needed to give the preservice teachers the ability to create their own understanding of critical literacy rather than expect them to assimilate my understanding as their own. When I opened my mind to their perspectives, I was able to grow as a critical literacy educator. This has left me thinking about the role of the lived experience (Dewey, 1997) in the growth of teacher educators. Not only did my preservice teachers learn through the lived experience but I also grew as a teacher educator through both the lived experience and engaging in reflective practice. I needed to wrestle with wanting to have all the answers and work towards engaging in the process of co-construction

without becoming involved in an inner battle to be perceived as competent. Through reflecting on my lived experience, I have a new understanding of the emotional work I need to continue to do in order to grow as an educator.



This study is significant to teacher educators in two ways. It emphasizes the importance of battling emotions and questioning one's theoretical understandings when co-teaching with preservice teachers. It also points to the importance of acknowledging and using emotions as a learning tool in the process of supporting preservice teachers as they investigate the concept of critical literacy. By documenting the process of co-facilitating the JAC and being vulnerable, I interrogated and expanded my theoretical framework and practice.

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