

Book Review

Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children

By Vivian Maria Vasquez

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In her introduction to *Negotiating Critical Literacies With Young Children*, Vivian Maria Vasquez poses the question “What does it take to be an effective educator today?” (p. ix). Although a question constantly discussed by parents, educators, politicians, and the general public, few outside the classroom see the obviousness or the relative simplicity of the answer. Noted early childhood authority, researcher and holistic teaching advocate Vivian Paley might answer that finding time for real talk and listening to those around us would be a starting point. Vasquez suggests that by utilizing a critical literacy model of teaching, one may connect the young learner to new ideas through thought-provoking conversation and the creation of a space where learning is active and engaging. Paley’s early childhood classrooms of the past two decades reflected the very activities, conversations and beliefs that Vasquez has researched and written about in her book. Many, if not most, of the practices used so successfully by Vasquez in her early childhood classroom are also those supported and acknowledged by the framers of the standards for young childhood education by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

As a contribution to the Erlbaum “Language, Culture, and Teaching” series, Vasquez’s book adds to the body of knowledge on teaching and

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learning in the early childhood classroom by highlighting the significance of knowing more about children than simply their name or how they act in the classroom. Vasquez contends that this knowledge must also include honoring the lifestyles and experiential base represented by the home environment of each young child. The author expands her beliefs by acknowledging that youngsters enter school with a unique and developed language and a wealth of knowledge, and this combination is more than appropriate for exploring almost any issue or practice outside their immediate world. Taking this premise even farther, Vasquez, in her demonstration classroom, offers her students a venue for hands-on exploration followed by stimulating conversation and the opportunity to delve deeper into the “whys and wherefores” of issues. This practice creates an environment that invites children to think critically about life issues and results in sending them forward on the path of becoming lifelong learners.

Vasquez begins her book by elaborating on the virtues of what critical literacy means to the young child beginning her “out of home” educational journey. As she does this, Vasquez elicits the support of all stakeholders: teachers, parents, politicians and those she calls the “in-school and out-of-school community of learners.” Like Paley before her, she works toward the premise that the “teacher engages her young students in creating and enacting a liberatory education based on the principles of democracy and fair play” (p. xi).

Vasquez also expands on the practices proposed by Freire (1970) when she advocates using a “problem-posing” approach which supports imaginative and critical thinking about teaching and learning because young children can comprehend and explore many vast and complex ideas. By embracing these theories and practices, this teaching style is more in tune with meeting the educational needs of linguistically and culturally diverse student populations, which Vasquez suggests is a challenge for many of today’s educators. Vasquez takes her pre-kindergarten children far past what most expect these young learners can comprehend. As she describes her students’ abilities to negotiate the critical literacy curriculum, it is obvious that the strategies she presents are grounded in relevant theory and research and they simply “work.”

For those educators interested and challenged to make their curriculum more relevant and critical, *Negotiating Critical Literacies With Young Children* offers a wide variety of ideas and suggestions. For preservice teachers, the book could serve as a model for practice with a chapter-by-chapter guide and lesson plan. Each chapter provides themed topics that both teacher and students decide upon. Themes are explored via the development of a clear outcome-oriented theme followed by an anticipatory set that has a literacy focus. Each unit encourages problem

confrontation that is supported by the use of relevant and social text. Finally, literacy extensions are encouraged with the process concluding with reflection and evaluation. Vasquez explains that “Children who learn using curriculum that is based on what matters to them are more likely to feel that what they are learning is important to their lives” (p. 141).

Vasquez dedicates the majority of the book to a step-by-step recounting of her approaches to encounters with children and the pedagogy that meets their individual and collective needs. By taking the reader through what she calls in chapter one “finding space for critical literacy,” she sets up the learning environment and later showcases the audit trail that enhances the learning experience for her students.

This book is a breath of fresh air in a world where some educators follow the conviction that children from diverse or poor backgrounds come to school with limited knowledge and few language skills, and in which the “one pattern fits all” model of teaching too often represents the range of curriculum design. The other deadly belief centers around the “almighty test score” and the underlying principle that teaching the skills found on standardized tests must take precedent over all other curriculum content. Vasquez addresses these issues in Chapter Two, where she deals with mandated requirements by engaging in critical literacy practices that include reading, writing, language arts and other curricular areas. She suggests that developing and using a curricular audit trail can accomplish the educator’s ability to negotiate a critical literacy curriculum. The greater part of this book is dedicated to a detailed description of the audit that Vasquez uses as a tool to develop her curriculum.

Vasquez uses her classroom as a true educational laboratory for fine tuning and exploring her own teaching skills, beliefs and goals and to ensure that her students are engaged, creative, happy and learning. Her system seems to be working. As noted researchers and educators Comber and Kamler (1997), suggest, “a critical perspective offers teachers a way to think about what students are learning to read and write, what they do with that reading and writing, and what that reading and writing does to them and their world” (p. 101). Yes, learning is alive and well in Vivian Vasquez’s classroom, and her young students are proof that reading, writing, language development and critical thinking can co-exist in a classroom where expectations are high and the curriculum is critical to their world.

References

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