

Critical Literacy in Neighborhood Bridges: An Exploratory Study

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The Children's Theatre Company

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Executive Summary

This report describes and examines the meaning and use of critical literacy in The Children's Theatre Company's Neighborhood Bridges (Bridges) program. Critical literacy is an orientation to reading that includes an understanding of how texts (oral stories, books, media) position readers (listeners/viewers), how readers position texts, and how texts are positioned within social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. Critical literacy is central to the philosophy of Bridges, which involves elementary and middle school students in storytelling and creative drama. An important goal of the program is to develop in children the capacity to analyze and challenge dominant social and cultural storylines as they create new storylines through imaginative retellings and reenactments. This report addresses the following questions:

1. What does critical literacy look like in the context of the Neighborhood Bridges program?
2. What evidence is there that students apply critical analysis and perspectives in their work related to the Neighborhood Bridges program (storytelling, writing, skits, and discussion)?
3. What is the role of creativity/imagination (through writing, theatre, and storytelling) in the development of critical literacy?

Four salient patterns of critical literacy emerged from analysis of data from classroom observations. These patterns along with a brief description of each follow:

- **Seeds of Critical Literacy:**
This pattern was indicated when discussions and/or skits began to address critical perspectives on the stories but did not do so with depth.
- **Probing Assumptions**
This pattern was indicated when discussions and/or skits revealed an understanding of the assumptions behind a story or the assumptions of the listeners and a willingness to challenge those assumptions.
- **Perspective Taking**
This pattern was indicated when discussions and/or skits included an attempt to understand or challenge the story from a perspective not offered in the story itself.
- **Creative Changes/Transformation**
This pattern was indicated when discussions and/or skits included imaginative retelling or acting that challenged the assumptions of the story or the way the listener is positioned by the story.

Although critical literacy is not a fixed set of practices, the findings in this report point to conditions that support critical literacy as well as conditions that serve as barriers to critical

literacy. The report summarizes each and offers recommendations followed by a discussion of new directions for critical literacy specific to the creative focus of Bridges.

Supportive Conditions for Critical Literacy: Talk, Stories, Time, and Space

Talk/Questions

- Discussions that focused on speculative questions that were open-ended in that they allowed for multiple and varied responses. Speculative questions tended to begin with phrases such as the following:
 - What if . . .
 - If you . . .
 - How might you . . .
 - If you were . . .
 - Would the story have changed if . . .
 - Why . . .
 - How do you feel when . . .
 - What else could [the character] have done . . .
 - What do you think about . . .
- These questions generated student enthusiasm and encouraged them to think analytically.
- Discussions that allowed for multiple perspectives and students' connections to personal experiences. Although these were often teacher initiated, these discussions included more student participation with students taking more conversational turns.
- Questions and comments that pushed students to think about dominant cultural assumptions and to consider alternative perspectives and storylines.
- Questions that invited playfulness. Play often challenged norms and conventions in ways conducive to critical literacy.
- Follow up and elaboration of student-initiated comments and questions.

Stories

- Stories themselves can support critical literacy in two ways:
 - ⇒ when the storytelling time included two stories clearly set up as counter stories
 - ⇒ when the genre itself challenges dominant storylines through exaggeration, parody, irony, or highly stylized conventions (e.g. tall tales; some fairy tales)
- Stories that were related to gender, which appeared to be particularly compelling to students and relevant to their lives. Students were very interested in gender norms whether to challenge them or, in some cases, to reinforce them. The latter also provided opportunities for TAs to probe the gender norms, thus leading to deeper discussion.

Time and Space

- Flexible use of time to allow for elaboration of students' questions and comments. TAs who were not overly constrained by the perceived obligation to complete all phases of Bridges tended to use time more flexibly based on students' interests and needs. When critical conversations began, they were sustained rather than cut short to move on.
- Classroom space is used differently in Bridges (e.g. circles, floor sitting, removal of desks). This, in itself, signifies to students that Bridges activities challenge the norms of

school as they know it. Since questioning norms is a central aspect of critical literacy, the use of space is a physical manifestation of critical literacy in Bridges.

Barriers to Critical Literacy and Related Recommendations

- IRE discourse pattern: Discussions that followed the “initiation-response-evaluation” classroom discourse pattern, typical of much of school discourse, were less effective in engaging the interest and participation of Bridges students. This pattern does not encourage analysis or creativity, which are both important elements of critical literacy in Neighborhood Bridges.

Recommendation: See Appendix for tips on avoiding this pattern and inviting student voices.

- Lengthy TA talk: At times TAs initiated discussions about social justice issues that seemed more important to the TA than the students. This pattern occurred most often in the ‘probing assumption’ category. As TAs attempted to foster critical literacy by initiating critical conversations about societal issues, students sometimes disengaged from the conversation. This occurred even when the topics seemed completely relevant to students’ age-appropriate interests (e.g. child labor).

Recommendation: Attending closely to students’ interest level during discussion can provide cues for TAs about when to abandon the topic or build on the strengths of Bridges by inserting an element of creativity or play.

- Background knowledge: Related to the previous item, TAs understandably felt the need to provide background knowledge about difficult societal issues. However, Bridges is probably not the best place for extended lessons to enhance background knowledge. Instead, extended TA talk on these subjects tended to result in less student participation.

Recommendation: See bullet on ‘collaboration with teacher.’

- Time: Bridges has many phases that TAs feel invested in completing. At times, the need to move to the next phase detracted from critical literacy in that discussions were lacking in reflection and analysis.

Recommendation: As noted in the previous section on conditions that support critical literacy, when TAs were more flexible about use of time and completing phases, more opportunities were available for critical literacy.

- Collaboration with teacher: Development of critical literacy practices and strategies takes time and reinforcement across subject areas.

Recommendation: It would be beneficial if planning with teachers could result in more curricular integration of critical literacy. For example, if social justice issues like child labor come up in Bridges stories, perhaps ties can be made to the social studies

curriculum, so that students would come to the Bridges with background knowledge that would allow the TA to spend less time on lengthy explanations and more time telling stories and creating skits. Cross-curricular integration also would provide students with a stronger knowledge base to use as a foundation for the deep thinking and creative interpretations that are central components of Bridges.

Future Directions

Creativity and play appear to hold potential for student-initiated critical literacy. Although students were often given specific directives for theatre games and skits, they were able to use their imaginations and bodies to narrate their own stories, thus speaking back to those they have heard or experienced. These critical enactments often took the form of humor or parody, which served to grab the audience's attention, at times, doing so by disrupting commonplace notions about gender and authority, two topics of particular interest to pre-adolescent students. Thus playfulness both in the process of creation and in the product (the skit) sometimes carried the most important messages that cut to the quick of students' concerns about the social worlds they inhabit and interpret. The challenge for TAs is to work with the capacity for critical literacy that children bring to the table. The study currently underway focusing on the meaning of critical literacy in Bridges' skit-making phase will help to illuminate the insights about creativity and critical literacy that have begun to emerge in this study.

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Introduction

This report describes and examines the meaning and use of critical literacy in The Children's Theatre Company's Neighborhood Bridges (Bridges) program. Critical literacy is an orientation to reading that includes an understanding of how texts (oral stories, books, media) position readers (listeners/viewers), how readers position texts, and how texts are positioned within social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. Critical literacy is central to the philosophy of Bridges, which involves elementary and middle school students in storytelling and creative drama. An important goal of the program is to develop in children the capacity to analyze and challenge dominant social and cultural storylines as they create new storylines through imaginative retellings and reenactments. Among the strategies found to be most effective for inviting and enhancing critical literacy are the following (Behrman, 2006, p. 490): (1) reading supplemental multiple texts; (2) reading from a resistant perspective; and (3) producing countertexts. These practices are central to the Bridges program. Traditional stories are paired with stories that provide supplemental or alternative storylines and perspectives. In addition to appreciating stories, students are encouraged to question, challenge, and probe stories as resistant listeners. Finally, through skit-making and writing, students create countertexts to the stories they have heard and discussed, often imagining and creating scenes or stories of their own from perspectives that challenge the dominant perspective in the original stories. In this way, "critical literacy means practicing the use of language in powerful ways" (Comber, 2001, p. 1).

Specifically, this report addresses the following research questions:

1. What does critical literacy look like in the context of the Neighborhood Bridges program?
2. What evidence is there that students apply critical analysis and perspectives in their work related to the Neighborhood Bridges program (storytelling, writing, skits, and discussion)?
3. What is the role of creativity/imagination (through writing, theatre, and storytelling) in the development of critical literacy?

Description of Neighborhood Bridges

Bridges is a 31-week program of storytelling and creative drama for elementary and middle school students intended to help them:

- develop critical literacy skills;
- recognize their capacity to become storytellers of their own lives;
- develop their abilities to write, speak, and think clearly;
- achieve state and national standards for theatre; and
- improve their achievement in reading and writing.

Bridges was founded in 1997 by Peter Brosius, Artistic Director of The Children's Theatre Company (CTC), and Jack Zipes, Professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. Each week, Bridges brings a TA (TA) into participating classrooms to

work collaboratively with the classroom teacher (CT). A typical two-hour Bridges session is composed of four parts:

The Fantastic Binominal: The TA and students spontaneously create a story through free association based on two arbitrarily chosen nouns and a preposition. Then students create their own stories and write them in their Bridges notebook. Each week 2-3 students are asked to present their stories to their peers. The TA and CT coach the students in using gestures and voice to dramatize their story.

Storytelling and Discussion: The TA and CT each tell a tale, often two different versions of the same tale, or tales related to each other. The tales are drawn from an anthology provided with the Bridges curriculum. Over the course of the year, tales are presented from several genres, including fairy tales, pourquois tales, and myths. The stories are followed by discussion designed to help students think critically about the content of the tales and the implications for their lives.

Skits and Theatre Games: Students work in small groups to create and perform brief skits based on the stories they have just heard. The TA leads students in games designed to develop their skills in areas such as focus, diction, gestures, and collaboration.

Writing Games: Students participate in a reflective writing exercise to solidify the day's learning and incorporate the creative energy of their skits into their own stories.

In addition to the weekly Bridges components students also do the following over the course of the program: create and perform one play at their school and a second play on-stage at CTC; write letters to and receive letters from a pen pal at another Bridges school; and attend a professional production at CTC and meet their pen pal.

Although students do some writing as part of their weekly Bridges' sessions, it is hoped that teachers incorporate some of students' Bridges writing into their regular writing instruction so that students have an opportunity to further develop their stories and their writing skills.

Each week, the TAs and CTs at each school meet for one hour to develop the lesson plans for upcoming sessions.

In 2008-2009, 19 CTs from 7 schools in Minneapolis and Saint Paul participated in the program. Across the 19 participating classrooms there were a total of 521 students involved in the program. Fifteen TAs participated in the program, including the Bridges Program Director and CTC's Director of Community Engagement.

Design and Methods

Participants

Researchers selected six of the 19 Bridges classrooms for the sample. Criteria for choosing the six classrooms were: classrooms lead by an experienced Bridges TA and CT, classrooms that represent a range of grade levels, and classrooms from both cities. Researchers decided to select classrooms

where experienced TAs and CTs were working in order to be most likely to see critical literacy in action. TAs or CTs who were less familiar with program may be less likely to be implementing this aspect thoroughly. In the resulting sample, two of the classrooms were in Saint Paul schools and four classrooms were in Minneapolis schools. Grade levels of the six classrooms were as follows: one third grade, one fourth grade, two fifth grade and one fifth/sixth grade classroom.

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

In February and March 2009, researchers made three visits to five of the six classrooms to observe a routine Bridges session. Due to last minute scheduling conflicts, the researchers visited the sixth classroom on only two occasions. During each visit, the researcher recorded observations on a protocol adapted for this study from a coding scheme for the analysis of classroom discourse in Singapore (Luke, Cazden, Lin, & Freebody, 2005), which built on coding schemes used in large-scale studies of classrooms in Australia (Spada and Frohlich, 1995) and the United States (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996). The protocol was completed once for each of the following phases of a Bridges classroom session: Opening and Fantastic Binominal; Storytelling #1 and Discussion; Storytelling #2 and Discussion; Theatre Games; Skit Creation; Skit Performance; and Final Writing. In addition, two digital voice recorders were set up in the classroom to capture the audio of each two-hour Bridges session.

Data Analysis

Observation protocols (supported by audio recordings as a secondary data source) were analyzed using qualitative coding procedures informed by grounded theory (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and constant comparative methods (Glasser, 1965) and focused on two types of coding procedures: open and axial coding. Open coding, an iterative process that began during data collection, involved exploring possible categories or themes that emerged across data sources. Axial coding involved identifying the most salient categories based on open coding and rereading all data to code according to these categories. During this stage, the research team noted connections and contradictions among categories that led to combining categories, forming sub-categories, deleting categories that were contradicted by data, and assessing the relevance of categories to the research questions. This coding process led to the emergence of four data-driven patterns that are elaborated in the next section on findings: (1) Seeds of critical literacy; (2) Probing assumptions; (3) Perspective taking; and (4) Creative changes/transformations.

Once these patterns emerged, all observation protocols were searched for examples of each. These examples were compiled within each category and then entered into a chart that listed the school, a brief summary of the example, the phase of the Bridges session in which the example occurred, and the initiating speaker (whether the example was initiated by the student, TA or CT and the type of initiation as described in the next section). The chart also included a column for comments that were sometimes included to provide more information about a particular example. Finally, examples that represented those most typical and atypical of the category were identified for further analysis and discussion in the next section on findings.

Findings

This section focuses on salient patterns of critical literacy that emerged from analysis of the coded observation protocols. These patterns along with a brief description of each follow:

- **Seeds of Critical Literacy:**
This pattern was indicated when discussions and/or skits began to address critical perspectives on the stories but did not do so with depth.
- **Probing Assumptions**
This pattern was indicated when discussions and/or skits revealed an understanding of the assumptions behind a story or the assumptions of the listeners and a willingness to challenge those assumptions.
- **Perspective Taking**
This pattern was indicated when discussions and/or skits included an attempt to understand or challenge the story from a perspective not offered in the story itself.
- **Creative Changes/Transformation**
This pattern was indicated when discussions and/or skits included imaginative retelling or acting that challenged the assumptions of the story or the way the listener is positioned by the story.

We further classified these patterns according to whether they were teacher initiated (usually the TA was the initiating speaker) or student initiated. Each of those categories included two sub-categories as described below:

Teaching Artist Initiated:

Agenda/Telling: These were instances when the TA explicitly told students something about the text or listener assumptions and positioning.

Questioning/Raising Ideas: These were instances when the TA asked questions or raised ideas that were meant to stimulate critical analysis and perspective taking.

Student Initiated:

Verbal: These were instances when students initiated conversations that challenged or analyzed a story's assumptions or the listeners' position related to the story.

Non-verbal/Embodied: These were instances when students used non-verbal means—most often their bodies as they planned and performed their skits—to alter a story, present a counter-story, or in some way challenge the position of the text and listener.

Seeds of Critical Literacy

The observation protocols and audio-recordings of class discussions included 28 examples of potential critical understandings that did not progress beyond the initial exploration. Often these occurred when TAs initiated with a critical literacy statement or question that was not taken up by

students beyond a response that skimmed the surface of the topic. The following is an example based on a pre and post discussion as well as the telling of a tall tale.

The TA began the pre-story discussion by explaining that in story, there is a treaty signed between the U.S. government and the Natives. Later, as part of the story, the TA said, “George and all the Native American people learned that you couldn’t trust the U.S. Government because they cheated, and they didn’t live up to the treaty. George felt sad, as big and strong as he was, he couldn’t help the people.” During the post-story discussion, the CT asked students which parts of the story were true. There were several responses. Then the TA pointed out the part about treaties and asked, “Did the U.S. honor all the treaties?” One student said she didn’t think so, but was not positive. The TA said he would tell about one specific example: “In almost all Native cultures, they had the idea that you couldn’t buy and sell land. You were to use it, take care of it, and move on. Like buying the air or sunlight. Until Europeans came, there was no idea of land ownership. In 1837 there was a treaty signed that still exists. They said the Native people would control the land west of the Mississippi as long as the sun shines and the grass grows.” The TA continued, explaining that Minneapolis is on Native territory according to the treaty. The TA asked, “Has the treaty been followed? No. The point is the treaty has been a problem.” The TA went on to talk about how in Minnesota, by treaty, the Natives get to fish in ways that others don’t, and some people say that’s not fair, and that Native reservations are the only legal place for gambling. He explains that Native people technically have their own lands. “It is a different world.” Students listen but do not respond and are not invited to respond. The educational assistant in the classroom contributed: “Can we tie that into the Civil Rights Movement, too? The assistant says: “If you live on a reservation, it is a sovereign nation, a country within a country. When you left the reservation as a Native American, you didn’t have the same rights, like the right to vote. During the Civil Rights Movement, Natives gained some rights as well as African Americans.” The TA ended the conversation saying, “As you get older, this will matter to you. It is important.”

In this example, the issue of Native American history from a perspective that is not commonly taught in schools is explored within a 5th-grade class, but the TA and teacher are the primary participants in the conversation, with the most and longest speakers’ turns. The TA is trying to nudge the students to think more deeply about injustices suffered by Native Americans, and about how history can be understood from non-dominant perspectives. It’s possible that the issue of justice, if explored on students’ own terms, could have moved the class in more critical directions. Children are concerned about justice and this point of reference might have connected more directly to a critical concept that students could then have explored more deeply than a specific discussion of treaties. In the end, the TA may have brought up an important topic of discussion that will “matter” to students in the future, but during this conversation, it is not clear if they engage with the ideas at all. Despite the end-result of the discussion, the seed of critical literacy is very much present and ripe for continued dialogue in future related discussions, skits, and writing.

Seeds of critical literacy were sometimes intentionally “planted” for future discussions. For instance, the same TA who initiated the child labor discussion concluded that session with the following: “What I want to leave you with today is—does it matter how our stuff . . . gets made? Or is the only important thing that we have it?” Thus, the TA has opened the door to more discussions and deeper thinking about the topic of child labor, consumerism, and materialism as storylines that shape the way we live in western, global, societies.

The following emerged as characteristics that were most prominent across typical examples of the “seeds of critical literacy.”

- TA initiation (10 agenda/telling and 12 questioning/raising ideas) of topics that students did not take up (possible lack of interest) were common in this category.
- Student-initiated examples occurred rarely but when they did the student would ask an unexpected question that the TA would pick up on and explore with the rest of the class (e.g. when a student asked if there were “any other good people” related to the myth *Zeus and the Great Flood*. The student wanted to know if there were more than two good people in the world. TA followed up with “Good Question!” and further discussion ensued.
- Lack of time for deep examination of topic sometimes kept the “seeds” from developing into full-blown critical discussions.
- Invitations to be creative (skits, theatre games) allowed for more student-initiated seeds of critical literacy. These often weren’t examined in more depth for lack of time or because they were audio-recorded but not heard by an adult.

Probing Assumptions

The observation protocols and audio-recordings of Bridges sessions included 37 examples of probing assumptions. Examples of probing assumptions are primarily found during the storytelling/discussion phase (31 examples). Almost all examples of probing assumptions were initiated either through agenda-setting or questioning by the TA (31 examples).

There were many important themes addressed through probing assumptions, including, poverty, child labor, gender equity, definitions of strength (physical and economic), violence, power, history (of slavery and of Native Americans), consumerism, materialism and family relationships. However, most were initiated by the TA and not taken up with interest by the students. Discussions related to gender issues, family relationships, and topics of concern to early adolescents (such as appearances and impressing others) generated more student participation. Students also participated more readily in discussion when the TAs questions were open-ended, allowing for many possible answers (e.g. “What do you think about the shift in what people said on the road? What is up with that? If you were the father-in-law what else could you have done than tie him to a tree on the road for the day?”).

One of the most common questions asked by TAs in an effort to get students to think about probing assumptions was a version of this question: “Who has power in this story?” There are examples of TAs asking this question while discussing myths, tall tales, pour quoi tales, and Utopian tales, almost all of the genres observed. Another similar question commonly asked was, “Who has authority in this story?” These questions led to some productive discussion about power relationships. For example, after telling a tall tale, one TA asked, “Who in the story had authority?” A student said, “the captain.” The TA asked, “Who gave him that?” Student: “He had a gun.” TA: “So a gun gives someone authority? According to the story?” Student: “They let fear control them.” TA: “So if you’re afraid of someone that gives them authority?” One student said, “no.” Others said, “yes.” Although the conversation ended here, it did begin to probe issues of power and violence.

Other TA questions that probed assumptions were closely related to specific stories. The following are some examples of other ‘probing assumptions’ questions that worked well in that they nudged students to think about larger concepts, such as freedom, strength, reparation, and rejection:

“In this story, what does it tell you about the United States after the slaves were freed?” “Are you saying that only people who are strong had power?”

“Do you think the leopard deserved what he got?”

“So my first question is...Mahadeva said to Parvati, ‘some people are not worth blessing. Because he’s a fool.’ Why did he call him a fool?”

Although there were few examples of students initiating in this category, one good example occurred during a fantastic binominal session. The TA had asked students to name powerful characters. Students named Lord Voldemort, Captain Knuckles, the Incredible Hulk, then one student exclaimed, “We need some girls.” The other phase where probing assumptions occasionally occurred was the skit phase. In a few examples, students took some of what they had discussed and included it in their skits. For example, students gave character power in their skits that did not have power during the story.

A problem that arose in this category involves the dominance of TA voices and participation over students. Most likely, this is the result of TA attempts to explain some complex historical and political ideas and events to students who, in many cases, did not have the background knowledge to participate. This may have been the reason that rich topics such as child labor or the treatment of Native Americans—both of which could be expected to connect with children’s desire for fairness and justice--seemed to result in monologues by the TA rather than discussion. The TAs in these cases brought up very important topics that question commonly held assumptions about history. When these topics are incorporated into entire class units—beyond the time-limitations of a weekly program such as Bridges—teachers can develop the topics through readings, media, discussions, and other materials not feasible for Bridges sessions

The following emerged as characteristics that were most prominent across typical examples of “probing assumptions.”

1. This section primarily addresses how stories are situated in social, cultural, historical and political contexts. Some of these contexts included poverty, child labor, gender equity, definitions of strength (physical and economic), violence, power, history (of slavery and of Native Americans), consumerism, materialism and family relationships.
2. Many of the discussions that probed important assumptions were dominated by TA talk rather than student talk. This may have been due to the difficulty of the topic which may have required more background knowledge than students possessed or due to lack of student interest in those particular topics.
3. Discussions that resulted in more student participation were ones that followed TA questions related to specific stories that helped students consider the story or a related concept in a new way. These questions were intriguing and open-ended with no expectation for a particular answer.
4. Most of the examples of probing assumptions happen during story discussions rather than skit-making or other phases of the sessions.

Perspective Taking

The observation protocols and audio-recordings of Bridges sessions included 29 examples of perspective taking. Examples of perspective taking can be found in all four of the phases that occur during a Bridges session: the fantastic binominal, storytelling, skits/theater games and writing. Perspective taking occurred most often during the storytelling phase, which includes discussion of the story, followed by the fantastic binominal phase. There were far fewer examples of perspective taking during the skits/theater games and writing phases.

There are 24 examples of teacher-initiated perspective taking and just 5 examples of student initiated. However, many of the teacher-initiated examples quickly began with the teacher setting the agenda for the activity or asking a question, but were soon followed with a good deal of student involvement and initiation. Given that students are typically taught to comprehend the story's intended meaning rather than challenge the text or consider perspectives other than those evident in the story, it is not surprising that TAs would provide the impetus for this critical literacy practice. Students demonstrated perspective taking both verbally and nonverbally, the latter especially during the few examples that occurred during theatre games and skits. In most of the sessions, when perspective taking was observed, it was one element, rather than the focus of the entire session.

Several times, TAs began the storytelling phase directing students to pay attention to different perspectives represented by different stories (if they were telling two) or different perspectives represented within the same story. One TA divided the class into groups and asked each group to listen for a particular perspective during the story. The subsequent discussion involved students in discussing their assigned perspectives.

For example, during one discussion of a tall tale, students were asked to explore the story from different gender perspectives. The TA first asked, "If you were Annie Christmas and you saw a bunch of men doing a job that you thought you could do better, how would you feel?" Later, she asked, "If you were a man, and you saw Annie Christmas do what [student name] just said, if you were a man working on that dock and you saw Annie Christmas come over there and say, 'I'm going to take this job over. I'm going to show you guys how it's done,' how would that make you feel? If you were one of those men, working on the dock?" In response to this question, the students suggested that the men might feel "...happy, because I would get free breaks!" Another said, "Kind of angry and worried," and the TA asked the student to "defend" this. The student said, "Because I might get fired or something and I wouldn't have enough money to feed my family." Finally, another student says, "Kind of threatened."

The TA led the students to discuss how stories position listeners in relation to gender through the tool of perspective taking and students clearly engaged in some thoughtful discussion. The next step to deepen the critical stance would be for the TA to bring the discussion back to gender equity to help students become aware of the bigger themes that connect to their affective responses.

An example of a time when the discussion did connect students' responses to larger issues of social justice occurred during a discussion of the peace tale *Irbil*. The TAs goal was to engage the students in perspective taking in order to think deeply about how this story positioned listeners to view worker rights and child labor. While the students do some imaging of what it would have felt like to be the factory worker and the carpet master, they do not pursue these different perspectives in a deeply critical way in this session. However, during the next Bridges session in the same classroom

studying *Irbil*, the TA asked the students to think more met cognitively about perspective taking. She reminded students of the different perspectives in the story (Iqbal's is "lousy" whereas the carpet master's is not), stressing that "...everybody does what they did for a reason. She reminded students of some additional actions in the story and then said, "Get behind what goes on and get into the reasons. That's the key." She later added, "This is the question I want you to think about today. Why do people do what they do? Don't just say they did it; it was stupid...think about 'they did that. I wonder why?'" In this example the TA is encouraging the students to think about why perspective taking matters and how it can help students think critically about a text.

Perspective taking is present in the three remaining phases as well. For example, several times during the fantastic binominal phase, TAs asked students to retell their stories from a different perspective, including a different character in the story, a different point of view, or a different narrator (i.e. a sports announcer or news broadcaster). During the skit/theater games phase students were, for example, asked during a game to act out two different perspectives, in this case rich and poor, and then reflect on how it felt to be in these different positions. During the skits, students were directed to adopt different perspectives, which they often did.

In one observed session, perspective taking was incorporated into every phase of the session. The TA introduced legends and directed students to pay attention to perspective as she told them two stories. During the discussion of the story, *The Pied Piper*, students were supported by questions from the TA to successfully explore the perspectives of the rats, children, mayor and parents in the story. The TA moved from the discussion into theater games, during which she asked students to "freeze" in positions that represented the different perspectives they had just discussed. During the skits, groups were asked to act out just one perspective, and during the writing phase, students were explicitly directed to, "Pretend you are someone else and explore a different perspective." Not only was the TA adept in her focus on perspective taking, but the genre and story were conducive to this critical literacy practice. From the data, it is seems that perhaps perspective taking was not as easily applied, nor should it be, to every genre.

The following emerged as characteristics that were most prominent across typical examples of "perspective taking."

- Much of the perspective taking observed was teacher-initiated (either through agenda setting or questioning). However, many of the teacher-initiated examples began with the teacher quickly setting the agenda for the activity or asking a question, but were soon followed with a good deal of student involvement and initiation
- Students appeared to enjoy exploring multiple perspectives and often discussed and performed perspective-taking enthusiastically.
- TAs were clearly passionate about the perspectives they wanted the students to take up.
- The implied focus of this category was how stories position listeners. Students were asked to explore different perspectives to see how the listener is positioned in relation to different social/political issues (gender, child labor).

- However, even when students did explore different perspectives, the discussions needed more follow-up in order to process, analyze and think metacognitively about why exploring different perspectives matters and how it can students to think about how texts position readers/listeners.
- The amount of perspective taking present in each session is most probably linked to the particular genre and story being discussed.

Creative Changes/Transformation

The observation protocols and audio-recordings of Bridges sessions included 28 examples of creative changes/transformation. In three of the phases that occur during a Bridges session, the fantastic binominal, storytelling/discussion, and skits/theatre games, the teacher-initiated and student-initiated creative changes were evenly distributed (14 for each). The nature of creative changes/transformations is such that students have a good deal of control of the process and product, and, thus, often initiate this critical literacy practice. Most of the examples of creative changes occurred during the fantastic binominal phase and during the skit/theatre games phase.

During the fantastic binominal (FB) phase, most of the creative changes/transformation began as teacher-initiated statements setting the agenda as they followed the Bridges plan for the phase. For example, before almost every FB, teachers reminded students that they should make changes of some sort to the story as they write. It was also very common for the TA to listen to the story and then suggest that the student transform the story and retell it immediately. For example, one TA asked a student to retell the story either by 1) pretending he/she was another character 2) asking the class what perspective they wanted to hear and retelling the story from that perspective or 3) retelling the story as a character rather than as an observer. The directions for retelling the stories ranged from specific, such as “add a line of dialogue,” to general, such as, “retell the story, changing something.”

The skit/theatre games phase typically began similarly to the FB phase, with teacher-initiated statements about creative changes/transformation that either set the agenda or told students what to do. Often, these statements were general. For example, one TA said, “Take one part of the story and change it to promote your interests.” Other times, the directions were more specific. For example, one TA said, “My challenge is, how can you make the authority in that story more effective... And remember, just like [student name] said, when you tell a story, you are in charge of it. You can change it.” This message is central to Bridges’ goals and to the critical literacy practices Bridges promotes.

The resulting skit was an example of a student-initiated verbal and nonverbal creative transformation that was scaffolded by additional teacher-initiated direction for more creative change. In this skit, which was very quick, the main character, Mike Fink, was escaping from a courtroom. He made a joke and everyone in the courtroom laughed. This made Mike angry, so he hit the judge and walked out. The TA told the group, “I want you to try this again. Just do this on the fly . . . but now Mike doesn’t slap him. Don’t tell me, just do it. Something that gives the judge authority.” The students perform the skit again. This time, Mike does not make a joke and says he’s sorry for his behavior. He asks to go, and the judge says, yes. In this example, through creative changes, students are imagining other possible constructions of a story and examining power relations, two elements of critical literacy.

Another example of creative changes/transformation during the skit phase occurred when one group performed the story about a woodcutter and his wishes, but had the woodcutter wish to be president, rather than king. The actor playing the woodcutter stood on a chair and said, “I am president! I am going to change his country!” In this example, through creative changes, students imagined other possible constructions of a story and examined power relations, in addition to commenting on the political climate in the country at the time (i.e. in the context of Obama’s election, equating the presidency with change).

Although not as many as in the FB and skit phases, there were several examples of creative changes/transformation in the storytelling/discussion phase. For example, during the study of *pourquoi* tales, students had listened to a story about a beautiful princess who was kept locked up by her father “for her own good” due to her beauty, and a lizard who tricks his way into becoming her husband (the king said that whoever could guess her favorite fruit could marry her). The TA leads students in discussion of the story:

TA: “. . . one last question. If this beautiful daughter was a prince, was a boy, would the story have changed?”

Student: “Yes! I don’t think they would have needed to lock him up in the tower for protection. He would have been trained in the military.”

TA: “So if he was a boy it would be different?”

Student 2: “I have a connection.”

Student 2: “When she was locked up in the castle, it was like *Rapunzel* a little bit...”

TA: “Good connection...that’s a story we didn’t do, but that’s a good connection.”

Student 4: “And like *Shrek*!”

TA calls on another student.

Student 5: “If someone tried to murder a prince, he can usually stop it. Like when a princess sees her father trying to kill someone, they usually try to stop it, but maybe a prince wouldn’t have...”

TA: “So would the king have tried to choose a wife for him?”

Student 5: “Yes, but he would have had them choose meat or something.”

TA: “So it would have been a different food.”

TA points out there are several cultures that still have arranged marriages.

In this example, the TA is inviting the students to think about a creative transformation of the story that would expose the gender stereotypes in the storyline. The students’ comments clearly show that they understand the gender roles depicted in the story through their use of equally stereotyped gender roles for males. For example, one of the students’ creative changes was that anyone wanting to marry the prince would have to guess his favorite meat, rather than his favorite fruit. Also, one student commented that the prince would be stronger than the princess and therefore would not need to be protected. Instead, he would be in the military. These playful changes show that students are aware of dominant cultural storylines, but they do not engage students in rupturing those storylines. One more step in the process—asking students why they were so easily able to determine how to change the storyline to accommodate a male main character—would lead to deeper thinking about our taken-for-granted assumptions about gender and the difficulty of getting outside of those frameworks.

One interesting feature of this category was the children's use of parody to critique gender and other (including social class) stereotypes. In order to use parody, one must understand the dominant assumption or stereotype well enough to find a way to talk back to it through humor. Youth are often attracted to media that use parody in the service of critical commentary, and they followed suit when they had the chance to transform the stories through theatre games or skits. For example, in response to *King Thrushbeard*, the TA used a theatre game that involved having students imagine themselves dancing at the ball and finding odd food in their pockets. One girl used her best "valley-girl" voice to exclaim, "Oh My God, this crust has *so* many calories!" In so doing, she is commenting on society's emphasis on body image, especially as it affects women. The danger of parody is that it can be used to reinforce rather than critique dominant norms, such as occurred on a few occasions documented in the observation protocols.

The following emerged as characteristics that were most prominent across typical examples of "creative changes/transformation."

- In general, it was harder to distinguish between teacher and student initiation in this category of critical literacy because the process of creative transformation involves a give and take relationship between TA and students as TAs make suggestions and students respond with agency and creativity.
- Although the prompts came from TAs, students participated enthusiastically in transforming the stories creatively, especially when the prompts were about subjects they had experienced or subjects related to the interests of their age level.
- Often the changes students made were meant to be humorous rather than critical. For example, one group renamed the game show *The Price is Right* to the *Price is Wrong*, and another changed a God to Godzilla.
- Invitations to make creative changes often led students to use parody, which combined humor and critique. This has great promise for critical literacy because it is appealing to youth and, especially when combined with discussion, can make a powerful statement.
- Sessions often lacked sufficient reflection and discussion, often due to a lack of time, about what changes had been made and why they had been made. These conversations would help students become more aware of their own critical capacities.
- The focus in this category was often on how readers/listeners position texts. Students were asked to use their imagination and creativity to see through the story's assumptions and position the texts in new ways.

Discussion and Recommendations

Although critical literacy is not a fixed set of practices, the findings in this report point to conditions that support critical literacy as well as conditions that serve as barriers to critical literacy. This section summarizes each and offers recommendations followed by a discussion of new directions for critical literacy specific to the creative focus of Bridges.

Supportive Conditions for Critical Literacy: Talk, Stories, Time, and Space

Talk/Questions

- Discussions that focused on speculative questions that were open-ended in that they allowed for multiple and varied responses. Speculative questions tended to begin with phrases such as the following:
 - What if . . .
 - If you . . .
 - How might you . . .
 - If you were . . .
 - Would the story have changed if . . .
 - Why . . .
 - How do you feel when . . .
 - What else could [the character] have done . . .
 - What do you think about . . .

These questions generated student enthusiasm and encouraged them to think analytically.

- Discussions that allowed for multiple perspectives and students' connections to personal experiences. Although these were often teacher initiated, these discussions included more student participation with students taking more conversational turns.
- Questions and comments that pushed students to think about dominant cultural assumptions and to consider alternative perspectives and storylines.
- Questions that invited playfulness. Play often challenged norms and conventions in ways conducive to critical literacy.
- Follow up and elaboration of student-initiated comments and questions.

Stories

- Stories themselves can support critical literacy in two ways:
 - ⇒ when the storytelling time included two stories clearly set up as counter stories
 - ⇒ when the genre itself challenges dominant storylines through exaggeration, parody, irony, or highly stylized conventions (e.g. tall tales; some fairy tales)
- Stories that were related to gender, which appeared to be particularly compelling to students and relevant to their lives. Students were very interested in gender norms whether to challenge them or, in some cases, to reinforce them. The latter also provided opportunities for TAs to probe the gender norms, thus leading to deeper discussion.

Time and Space

- Flexible use of time to allow for elaboration of students' questions and comments. TAs who were not overly constrained by the perceived obligation to complete all phases of Bridges tended to use time more flexibly based on students' interests and needs. When critical conversations began, they were sustained rather than cut short to move on.
- Classroom space is used differently in Bridges (e.g. circles, floor sitting, removal of desks). This, in itself, signifies to students that Bridges activities challenge the norms of school as they know it. Since questioning norms is a central aspect of critical literacy, the use of space is a physical manifestation of critical literacy in Bridges.

Barriers to Critical Literacy and Related Recommendations

- IRE discourse pattern: Discussions that followed the “initiation-response-evaluation” classroom discourse pattern, typical of much of school discourse, were less effective in engaging the interest and participation of Bridges students. This pattern does not encourage analysis or creativity, which are both important elements of critical literacy in Neighborhood Bridges.

Recommendation: See Appendix for tips on avoiding this pattern and inviting student voices.

- Lengthy TA talk: At times TAs initiated discussions about social justice issues that seemed more important to the TA than the students. This pattern occurred most often in the ‘probing assumption’ category. As TAs attempted to foster critical literacy by initiating critical conversations about societal issues, students sometimes disengaged from the conversation. This occurred even when the topics seemed completely relevant to students’ age-appropriate interests (e.g. child labor).

Recommendation: Attending closely to students’ interest level during discussion can provide cues for TAs about when to abandon the topic or build on the strengths of Bridges by inserting an element of creativity or play.

- Background knowledge: Related to the previous item, TAs understandably felt the need to provide background knowledge about difficult societal issues. However, Bridges is probably not the best place for extended lessons to enhance background knowledge. Instead, extended TA talk on these subjects tended to result in less student participation.

Recommendation: See bullet on ‘collaboration with teacher.’

- Time: Bridges has many phases that TAs feel invested in completing. At times, the need to move to the next phase detracted from critical literacy in that discussions were lacking in reflection and analysis.

Recommendation: As noted in the previous section on conditions that support critical literacy, when TAs were more flexible about use of time and completing phases, more opportunities were available for critical literacy.

- Collaboration with teacher: Development of critical literacy practices and strategies takes time and reinforcement across subject areas.

Recommendation: It would be beneficial if planning with teachers could result in more curricular integration of critical literacy. For example, if social justice issues like child labor come up in Bridges stories, perhaps ties can be made to the social studies curriculum, so that students would come to the Bridges with background knowledge that would allow the TA to spend less time on lengthy explanations and more time

telling stories and creating skits. Cross-curricular integration also would provide students with a stronger knowledge base to use as a foundation for the deep thinking and creative interpretations that are central components of Bridges.

Future Directions

Creativity and play appear to hold potential for student-initiated critical literacy. Although students were often given specific directives for theatre games and skits, they were able to use their imaginations and bodies to narrate their own stories, thus speaking back to those they have heard or experienced. These critical enactments often took the form of humor or parody, which served to grab the audience's attention, at times, doing so by disrupting commonplace notions about gender and authority, two topics of particular interest to pre-adolescent students. Thus playfulness both in the process of creation and in the product (the skit) sometimes carried the most important messages that cut to the quick of students' concerns about the social worlds they inhabit and interpret. The challenge for TAs is to work with the capacity for critical literacy that children bring to the table. The study currently underway focusing on the meaning of critical literacy in Bridges' skit-making phase will help to illuminate the insights about creativity and critical literacy that have begun to emerge in this study.

Table 1
Categories of Critical Literacy: Frequency and Initiator

CATEGORY	OVERALL FREQUENCY	STUDENT-INITIATED FREQUENCY^a	TA-INITIATED FREQUENCY
Seeds of Critical Literacy	28	6	22
Probing Assumptions	37	6	31
Perspective Taking	29	5	24
Creative Changes	28	14	14

^aIncludes both the verbal and non-verbal/embodied sub-categories

Table 2
Frequency for Sub-Categories within Teaching-Artist Initiated Examples

CATEGORY	TA-INITIATED FREQUENCY	AGENDA/TELLING FREQUENCY	QUESTIONING/RAISING IDEAS FREQUENCY
Seeds of Critical Literacy	22	10	12
Probing Assumptions	31	7	24
Perspective Taking	24	14	10
Creative Changes	14	9	5

Appendix

Tips for Inviting Student Voices during Storytelling Discussions

1. Let the students open the discussion or try one open-ended question to start the discussion: “Did you like ...?” “What did you think of ...?” or “What bugs you about ...?”
2. Try making a thought-provoking statement rather than asking a question: “I liked that the king’s daughter had a ‘proud spirit’” [in King Thrushbeard].
3. Listen carefully: Abandon preconceived notions about where the discussion should lead. Follow the child.
4. Take the short turn: Practice wait time—remain silent and make eye contact. Use nonverbal gestures to show you are enjoying the child’s responses and talk. Give short responses: “really,” “oh?” “what else?” “Mmmm” “uh huh.” Repeat the child’s last few words with a rising intonation (encouraging him/her to continue).
5. Model your own thinking: Share your own predictions and inferences (“When I read that part, I wondered what would be the reason ...”).
6. Ask the child to enter the story world: “What would you do if ...?”
7. Ask for more elaboration: “Why do you think ...?”
8. Re-voice responses that might otherwise be ignored (i.e. not a popular point of view; low-status student).
9. Have students jot down some quick responses or questions and share them with a neighbor before moving to whole class discussion (pair share).
10. Ask if the story reminds the child of others s/he has read (or seen in a movie).
11. Ask open-ended questions that have multiple answers (rather than questions that have a single correct answer).
12. Rule of thumb: Try not to ask questions you know the answer to!

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