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Journal of Early Childhood Literacy 2010 10: 379
DOI: 10.1177/1468798410382354

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Journal of Early Childhood Literacy
10(4) 379–409
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DOI: 10.1177/1468798410382354
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Critical literacy in a primary multiliteracies classroom: The Hurricane Group

Penny Silvers

Dominican University, USA

Mary Shorey

Pritchett Elementary School, Illinois, USA

Linda Crafton

University of Wisconsin Parkside, USA

Abstract

This qualitative research presents an expanded perspective of literacy practices in which young students engage in multiple literacies while exploring personal inquiries about Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, LA. An extended classroom example and analysis taken from a broader research project focusing on early multiliteracies, illustrates the ability of young students to ask critical questions, explore alternative perspectives, and engage in multimodal responses to construct and communicate meaning as they take social action. Narrative inquiry and discourse analysis provide insight into ways that primary children engage in authentic inquiry from a critical, social justice perspective. They also show how traditional early childhood curriculum can focus on social issues through critical framing. This classroom example demonstrates students' increasing ability to use a range of multimodal tools to accomplish mutually agreed socially relevant goals within a classroom community of practice.

Keywords

Early multiliteracies, multimodal tools, critical literacy, critical inquiry, communities of practice, social justice

Corresponding author:

Penny Silvers, School of Education, Parmer Hall, Dominican University, 7900 W, Division Street, River Forest IL 60305, USA

Email: psilvers@dom.edu

Introduction

During the first week of the 2007/08 school year, Bobby¹ ran into M's first grade class to inform her that there was a new hurricane brewing in the Gulf of Mexico. Now a third grader, he wanted to reconvene the Hurricane Katrina inquiry group he had been part of when he was in her first grade class two years earlier. The word got around the third grade and by the following week, the original Hurricane Group had sent M an e-mail asking when they could have lunch and made a date to meet together. P (researcher) also received a special invitation to join the group at lunch from Carrie, another Hurricane Group student who had been e-mailing P periodically since first grade. On the day of the lunch reunion, the five students came right into M's room as if they had never left it, and took their former seats around the work table in the center of the room. Bobby found some hurricane books from M's classroom library and placed them in the center of the table, just as he had done in first grade. Carrie asked M if she had kept their research 'stuff' and M opened her laptop to show them her digital photographs of their first grade work. With great nostalgia about all that had been accomplished in first grade, M and the students began to reflect and reminisce.

Background information

Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in August 2005, right at the beginning of the new school year. The disaster was on the television news constantly and M's students, then just six- or seven-years-old, were both horrified and fascinated by the destructive power of the storm, the scientific information coming across the news channels, and the wealth of information available on the Internet. Hurricane Katrina was a national disaster of great interest to everyone in the country, and in M's classroom, it became an authentic primary grade curricular engagement. P and L are two university researchers who have been exploring multiliteracies as an expanded view of literacy practices with M (classroom teacher and researcher) in her primary grade classroom. We saw this event as a perfect opportunity for the students to take on a significant issue and to deepen our understanding of multiliteracies theory while exploring its many facets in practice in M's classroom.

M's elementary school is in a fairly affluent, multicultural suburb of Chicago. In her 2005 class of 25 six- and seven-year-old children, 60 % were Caucasian and 40 % represented Asian, Hispanic, and other ethnicities. Collectively, in addition to English, they spoke many languages, including

Polish, Russian, Hindu, Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, Greek, and Spanish. But regardless of the diverse ethnicities and languages, the students were united in their interest to learn more about storms and weather-related disasters.

In this primary multicultural classroom, a small group of concerned young students named themselves the Hurricane Group and with the support of their teacher, assumed the leadership in taking on a social justice inquiry study about the hurricane. Following a brief review of the multiliteracies literature and our research methodology, we present an extended classroom example and analysis to illustrate how the teacher scaffolded discussions among the Hurricane Group members to raise critical questions, present alternative perspectives, and encourage multimodal responses to help the students construct meaning. We present a Hurricane Group discussion that occurred early in the year, and contrast it with one of their discussions toward the end of the year to demonstrate the students' expanding ability to use a range of multimodal tools to accomplish mutually agreed socially relevant goals within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This example is just one of many taken from our broader research project focusing on early multiliteracies. However, it demonstrates how young children can engage in authentic inquiry from a critical, social justice perspective (Comber, 2003; Vasquez, 2003). It also provides insight into how early childhood curriculum can be multimodal, focused on social issues, and responsive to students' needs and interests, while accomplishing traditional curricular benchmarks and standards. We conclude with a discussion of our learning and implications for literacy instruction.

Literature and theories informing the work

Traditional views of early literacy instruction emphasize only print literacy. However, narrow views of literacy do not go far enough to prepare learners to negotiate their lived experiences outside of school. Children in the 21st century need to be able to use multiple literacies to meet the informational challenges and manage the complexities of the political, economic, and technological world beyond school (Kress, 2003). Multiliteracies theory is described as a design science in which curriculum and instruction are in a continuous process of being designed and redesigned based on student needs, interests, engagements, and actions during learning (New London Group, 2000). As the world changes technologically, socially, and economically, the use of texts, and means of communication are changing rapidly. Life opportunities are now embedded within a social environment that includes

increased cultural diversity and new ways of communicating (Cazden et al., 1996). Even in the earliest grades, 'literacy and literate practices encompass a greater range of knowledge, skills, processes, and behaviors . . . and these practices will continue to change' (Anstey and Bull, 2006, p. 17).

Our understanding of literacy pedagogy requires an expanded perspective that will prepare students for the literacy demands of a more complex world. As teachers and researchers, we recognize that children need a new toolkit of basic skills that encompasses ways of communicating and constructing meaning that are multimodal (print, art, drama, language) and multimedial (combining different means of communication, such as the Internet and video) (Luke and Freebody, 1999; Vasquez et al., 2004). It is important to recognize that meaning may be constructed through different kinds of texts in various ways, such as moving images, spoken language, animation, graphs, and maps. Reading can include visual images, digital information, gestures, voice, movement, music, as well as print. This is in direct contrast to typical school curricula that still tend to 'treat literacy as monomodal, monolingualistic, and monocultural, and thus appears to have more in common with what children learned about literacy a generation ago than with the literacies needed for the world today' (Siegel et al., 2008, p. 97).

In M's classroom, we saw children moving intentionally and seamlessly between various sign systems to accomplish particular goals for particular purposes. Many of the children naturally gravitated to the three computers in her classroom and used them confidently. They readily assumed the role of experts and, whenever needed, willingly coached those students who were less proficient. In addition to using technology, students drew pictures to illustrate their writing, wrote notes to the teacher to inform her of their needs or concerns, dramatized favorite stories, painted their interpretation of a story, or sang songs and listened to music that fitted the mood of what was being studied (e.g. jazz and blues to connect with New Orleans history). To these children, linguistic (print) texts were only one of a range of resources available to them as they constructed meaning and learned about their world.

We also believe that literacy is about social practices and how one lives one's life (Harste, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). These behaviors develop within various communities of practice when participants take on shared endeavors to accomplish goals and construct identities in relation to those communities (Crafton et al., 2007; Wenger, 1998). Participants bring their own lifeworlds (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000) to these communities. By collaboratively pursuing socially meaningful work, the community of practice provides an opportunity to learn together while developing an identity of participation. In this way,

identity and learning serve each other in a series of transformative experiences (Wenger, 1998). These communities need to be engaged in activities that have meaning and consequences beyond their boundaries, providing experiences for students to find 'ways of being in the world that can encompass multiple, conflicting perspectives in the course of addressing significant issues' (Wenger, 1998, p. 275). The Hurricane Group was united in its desire to teach the rest of the class what they were learning about the Katrina disaster. Through all their talk, shared experiences, and work gathering information and planning to do something significant, they were developing a language of participation and an understanding that their inquiry was important not only for the rest of the class, but beyond the classroom as well.

A critical literacy curriculum makes diversity and difference visible and helps teach children to critique their world, examine their own assumptions and beliefs, and take on new identities as they try to make a difference through social action (Leland and Harste, 2004). This theory recognizes that literacy and learning are not neutral practices – that certain interests are always being served (Lewison et al., 2008; Vasquez, 2003). We believe that even with young children, literacy practices should include teaching for social action, cultural critique, and for democracy, both inside and outside of school (Bomer and Bomer, 2001; Dewey, 1939).

Luke and Freebody (1999) theorize that readers use at least four knowledge resources when engaging in any literacy event: code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text critic. The code breaker uses basic structural conventions and patterns of language such as the alphabet, letters and sounds in words, spelling, and other grammatical features of written texts. The code breaker also learns about ways that members of a community interact, behave or talk together while gaining knowledge of the particular cultural codes that are valued. The meaning maker understands and constructs written, visual, and oral texts, and recognizes that this process reflects an individual's prior and current knowledge of what is acceptable or appropriate in a particular community. The text user can use texts in socially appropriate ways to reflect social and cultural practices or ways of thinking and behaving that are acceptable to a particular group. Finally, the text critic learns to read the word and the world from a critical lens (Freire, 1998); there is an awareness that texts are socially constructed and represent particular points of view that privilege some perspectives while silencing or marginalizing others (Kucer, 2008; Vasquez et al., 2004).

Luke and Freebody's research demonstrates that real world literacy involves all four of these dimensions working together. However, in a traditional

curriculum, the dimensions of code breaker and meaning maker are usually privileged over text user and text critic (Kucer, 2008). Through our research, we have come to understand that a critical literacy stance is a significant part of a multiliteracies curriculum and provides a way to more clearly position the linguistic dimensions of text user and text critic into the early childhood curriculum.

As we continue to work with young children, we understand the need to be intentional and explicit in helping children become knowledgeable consumers of information, able to critically question, analyze, problem solve from different perspectives, and take action on behalf of social justice. Of great importance, regardless of the grade or age, is the recognition that all texts need to be understood in relation to identities and social worlds, and provide ways for individuals to interpret the world and their place in it. This critical literacy perspective is essential to helping others act on their beliefs and engage in socially relevant action (Gee, 2000; Lewison et al., 2002).

Methodology

In this ongoing qualitative research study, we three researchers have been observing, analyzing, and interpreting the lived experiences of 25 six- and seven-year-old children within their classroom context, seeking a deeper understanding of literacy practices and the implications for curriculum, teaching, and learning in a multiliteracies classroom. We designed our research question to help us better understand the many and varied paths to multiple literacies and to examine ways in which children use them to connect, communicate, and construct meaning. The main research question that has guided our work asks: what are the ways in which young children develop a broader understanding of literacy practices and construct new identities as they engage in multiple literacies, including conventional print, digital, visual, spatial, gestural, musical, and critical literacies?

Our experience with the Hurricane Group began in 2005, at the start of our second year of researching together in M's classroom. During that year, P spent at least one morning a week in M's classroom as a participant-observer (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992) during the language arts block of instruction. In addition to observing and writing field notes, P interacted with individual children by reading and writing with them, occasionally reading stories to the whole class, and engaging with small inquiry groups to help them gather information in a variety of ways (books, Internet, writing, etc.). This regular participation in M's classroom provided P with greater insight and

understanding of the teaching, curriculum, and students as learners. L visited the classroom once each semester, but M and P met with L monthly after school to review data, view videos, read and write narratives about what was seen in the classroom, and discuss emerging themes and categories, using multiliteracies theories to further inform our thinking.

We used narrative inquiry to help us analyze our data (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The narrative inquiry methodology divides itself into 'the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space and the directions this framework allows our inquiries to travel – inward, outward, backward, forward, and situated within place' allowing us to more closely examine the 'personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); combined with the notion of place (situation)' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, pp. 49–50). It emphasizes multiple narratives constructed over time from the researchers' lived experiences in the field and provides a way to reflect deeply on our experiences (Dewey, 1938), generating new insights and inquiries.

P and M each wrote individual field note observations of the class events, student interactions, and student responses during discussions. These field notes were shared weekly and became part of the data pool that helped identify insights into our research question in the context of the classroom and M's teaching. In addition to our written field notes, teacher/researcher data also included: reflective journaling exchanged and elaborated upon via e-mail; and audiotaped transcriptions and analyses of teacher and researcher debriefings, discussions, planning for instruction, curriculum analysis, and reflections on learning. Student data sources included: anecdotal observations written as field notes documenting multimodal ways students construct meaning; work samples; photographs; transcriptions of selected videos of teacher read-alouds, class discussions, and small group work; students' oral and written reflections of their learning (content and process); and teacher anecdotal observations of students' reading and writing development related to grade-level literacy objectives.

During the research process, the data were continually analyzed, discussed, reflected upon, and rewritten multiple times in narrative form as we tried to make sense of what they were revealing. Our discussions and written narratives moved from initial observations to interim texts to final research texts, revealing patterns, tensions, themes, and narrative threads that suggested insight to inform our research questions and generate possibilities for new inquiries. As we reflected together about the classroom events, shared stories and observations, and compiled narrative data, the evolving themes fell into three major categories: multimodal literacies; communities of practice

including the sociocultural dimension of learning; and critical literacy, which became a category of significance in our research, influencing all the other literacies.

It is important to note that we three researchers bring a critical, social justice perspective to the data analysis, intentionally focusing on issues of power, equity, justice, and equal access in regard to gender, race, and class. Collected data were analyzed with the understanding that we have a particular agenda of affecting change and taking action to accomplish social goals. Sharing and interpreting data in our professional community of practice provided opportunities for us as researchers, to benefit from our individual backgrounds, areas of expertise in literacy and curriculum, and shared insights. We also audiotaped and transcribed our professional conversations and reflections to gain insight into our growing understanding of multiliteracies, and the dynamics of collaboration within a community of practice. Discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) was used to analyze selected segments of our researcher discussions, and also selected transcripts from whole-class discussions, small-group student dialogue, and teacher read-alouds.

We used the curricular/analytical framework developed by Cope and Kalantzis (2000) to examine M's classroom practice and organize our observations to more easily notice and better understand the dynamics of teaching and student learning that were occurring. This framework includes four interconnected components: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. *Situated practice* is about the students' lived experiences and learning in their daily classroom context where they are immersed in meaningful experiences within their classroom community as they participate in their own learning. *Overt instruction* occurs when instruction is intentional, scaffolding for learning is occurring, and students are helped to gain conscious understanding and control of what they are constructing and acquiring as knowledge. *Critical framing* helps students learn to view what is being analyzed or studied from a critical perspective in terms of power, politics, ideology, and values. Critical framing supports the engagement of students in analyzing tacit assumptions inherent in behaviors, interactions, and discussions – whether they are the students' beliefs, those of the characters in novels, or the author's point of view. *Transformed practice* is about living one's beliefs as one has come to understand them, developing new ways of participating, and implementing new understandings. In working toward the goal of transformed practice, the expectation is for the students to learn to recognize their own biases and beliefs, name them, act on them, and begin

to change old ways of behaving, leading to identity transformation (Wink, 2005). Through this framework, we were able to categorize our data to see more clearly, the evolving shifts in social consciousness leading to agency and identity transformation.

Analysis of the classroom learning that occurred throughout the hurricane experience demonstrated that all four features of this framework occurred in various ways. M moved in and out of each dimension as she carefully guided student learning toward transformed practice. However, data analysis showed that it was the critical framing component that consistently provided the greatest impact in helping students take on a critical social justice identity. This element was especially visible as M interacted with the Hurricane Group. But she also raised critical social justice questions during read-aloud time with the whole class, during discussions about stories the students were reading, and when she asked everyone to reflect on their learning during group inquiry time. Critical framing helped infuse a critical social justice perspective into the work of the classroom and provided ways to help move all the students toward taking social action. It also helped to inform curriculum and instruction as we saw opportunities to expand the district's existing language arts and social studies curriculum toward content that was more focused on social justice issues and critical perspectives.

Multiliteracies in the primary classroom

As we researched how literacy is multimodal, we observed many ways M's students constructed meaning – through drama, music, art, gestures, expressions, technology, as well as print. We know from Halliday's work (1975) that children learn language, learn about language, and learn through language all at the same time. Similarly with multiliteracies, we observed the students' learning unfolding in layers, with multiple events, insights, and instruction occurring simultaneously as critical incidents occurred and opportunities emerged for moving beyond the traditional curriculum.

From the beginning of the school year, M helped all her students to understand that reading includes more than print and that they could 'read' pictures, information on the computer, each other's expressions and body language – the signs all around us. She was also explicit in informing the students that it is important to ask critical questions as they analyze what they read. Critical questions informed by the work of Vasquez (2003) were posted in the classroom and, over time, became part of the multiliteracies framework.

They were referred to and used for all book discussions, conversations, inquiries, and taking social action. These questions asked:

- Whose voices are heard? Whose voices are absent?
- What does the author/illustrator want the reader to think/understand?
- What is an alternative to the author/illustrator's message?
- How will a critical reading of this text help me change my views or actions in relation to other people?

M knew it would be possible to help the students understand that there were hurricane victims – but she wanted to raise the children's awareness of the bigger issues of racism and poverty, an understanding of which would support actions toward social justice. At times, M wondered if this was even appropriate for first graders to think about, but she was willing to move forward, believing – as we all do – in the power of the students to guide the way. By following the students' lead, we discovered that they were, indeed, capable of engaging in meaningful critical learning, using all the multimodal tools available to them as resources.

The Hurricane Group gets started through inquiry

M's district social studies curriculum for first grade included a study of families, neighborhoods, citizenship, rights and responsibilities, and needs and wants. It also included African American history (with a focus on Dr Martin Luther King, Jr). The language arts curriculum emphasized beginning reading and writing skills, along with guided reading using the district reading program books. M also supplemented the reading program with fiction and non-fiction books from the library and her own personal collection. She used teacher read-alouds and thematically related multimodal resources (e.g. picture books, magazines, websites, tapes of newscasts, digital photographs, drama, and music) to support the students' inquiries.

M knew she wanted to make the traditional curriculum more critically focused, but she had an obligation to honor the required content being taught by her grade-level team, mandated by the district, and aligned with state standards. She also recognized the importance of curricular integration and looked for ways to add authentic experiences to the required content. M worked to design opportunities that would provide choices for the children to explore topics of interest to them. Involving the students in inquiry groups focused on units of instruction helped M begin to create a classroom community of practice (Wenger, 1998), where children were engaged in

learning to read through meaningful work, while at the same time, achieving the district curricular expectations.

M's morning consisted of two-and-a-half hours of language arts instruction. This block of time included reading and writing workshop as well as guided reading with small groups and whole-class instruction about specific topics of interest or need (e.g. spelling, grammar, comprehension strategies, etc.). During this time, M also set up opportunities for the students to engage in learning centers where small groups of students could participate in various language arts activities such as dramatizing stories, illustrating their writing, partner reading, or working on the computer. Students could also choose to read and write together about topics of mutual interest. These groups provided a way for the children to begin to take responsibility for their learning from the start, exploring and developing expertise in subjects which would then be shared with the class.

Early in the school year, the entire class became interested in Hurricane Katrina as the extensive media coverage provided an authentic opportunity to use multiliteracies to gather information from many resources (e.g. Internet, pictures, news stories, books, personal stories, magazines, videos). While everyone wanted to learn more about hurricanes, one particular group of three girls and two boys actually took ownership of the subject and called themselves the Hurricane Group. The extended example that follows occurred in October 2005, early in the school year. It shows how the teacher's critical framing provided opportunities for instruction that encouraged this small group of students to examine multiple perspectives and begin to ask questions related to power and privilege. It demonstrates ways that M's critical framing supported her students' emerging understanding and led to social action over time. It also illustrates how a critical literacy perspective made it possible to add a new dimension to the district's existing language arts and social studies curriculum, expanding the potential for student learning (Table 1).

In this dialogue, the children are gathered around a circular table in the middle of the room having a discussion, led by their teacher, M, along with P, the university researcher. This segment occurs toward the end of the discussion (teacher and researcher comments are in italics to more easily differentiate them from the students' responses):

Andy [drawing a picture]: I want to show the water coming in so fast the people couldn't go in or out – this will be in my hurricane book.

Carrie: They couldn't get any food or water to drink. What about dry clothes?

Table 1. First grade curriculum connections

First grade curriculum	Critical connections
Families and communities	Hurricane Katrina: homelessness What happened to many families?
Needs and wants	What do people need to survive? Consumerism: resisting some 'wants'
Citizenship: being a good citizen in my classroom; community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rights and responsibilities ● Martin Luther King 	Equal rights: being a good citizen <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Timeline of African American history ● What can we do to help?
Habitats	Hurricane Katrina: environmental concerns; Wetlands; zoo animals; food, materials, and supplies for building
Weather	Storms: tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis; impact on people's lives
Reading and writing: fiction, non-fiction	Reading and writing for social justice purposes: research and inquiry; finding a school in New Orleans Communication: letter to parents; e-mailing; writing stories and letters

Ronna: They could go out to the stores.

Andy: But they had no money and the stores were probably closed.

Bobby: Or flooded.

M: You've been working really hard on making hurricane books. You all have different ideas. And there are many issues or problems that are connected with this disaster. Bobby, you are really interested in science – you even brought some books from home to help write a book about hurricanes.

Bobby: Yeah, the eye of the storm could look like an eyeball.

M: The eye is the quiet spot – and the storm is swirling all around it.

Bobby: Yeah – the safe spot – like it says in my book. [shows pictures to the group]

Becky: Why didn't they know where to go right away – or call someone to help them? Maybe we can make a book about how to be safe during a storm.

Then people will learn to be safe and what to do to prepare for a hurricane. They can tell others.

Carrie: I bet it was dangerous to walk in the flooded streets – they have snakes there.

Ronna [walking around the room imitating how carefully people had to move in the flood]: And watch out for alligators.

Andy: What about the dogs and cats?

Bobby: A lot of them drowned.

P: So – who are the people who are the victims of the hurricane? Why do you think some got out and others couldn't?

Carrie: The poor people stayed behind because they didn't have cars or couldn't afford the gas.

P: Who were these poor people?

Becky [ignoring P's question]: I bet they were hot inside with no air conditioning.

P: What could have been done for them? Their houses were all gone or flooded. I have good friends who live in New Orleans. They had to pack up whatever would fit into their car and drive out of the city to a safe place away from the hurricane. They could get out. But some people couldn't, and actually, some people wouldn't. Take a look at this picture on the cover of the magazine [Newsweek, September 12, 2005]. What do you notice? What's going on here?

Carrie: It's a mother with two children – she's carrying two babies and running from the flooding. I think she needs milk to feed them.

Ronna: She looks really scared.

Becky: Look, see the water in the street and she's running with the kids. Why didn't she just drive out of town like your friends before the hurricane came?

P: Good question. She sure didn't get out. Why do you think that happened? Do you notice anything about her?

Carrie: Yeah, she's mad or scared, and probably wondering how she's going to take care of the babies – with no diapers, no milk, not even water to drink.

M: You are really doing a great job of reading the pictures. What words would you use as you read the pictures? What words would describe this picture? Can you write them down around the picture? These words will tell a story, too.

[The children write the following words on a piece of paper: mad, worried, scared, hungry, tired, fainting, disastrously, devastated, 'hell' (not a bad word), and help. Then they decide to write what they think would be 'safe things' or things that the woman could use to be safe: blankets, water, food, clothes, a way to get out (Figure 1).]

P [looking closely at the picture with the children]: Do you notice that she is African American? Many of the poor people who couldn't get out of N.O. were poor and African American.

M: How do you feel about the people who couldn't get out? Do you think that's fair? Do you think that others should have been helping more? We've been talking about citizens. Citizens have rights and responsibilities. Do we, as citizens, have the right to be helped when we are in need? Do we have the responsibility to help others? What could people do to help? Do you think we should do something?

Ronna: On Nickelodeon [TV show] they are doing a backpack project. I'd like to do a project.

Let's read the pichr's
 The lady in the pichr looks
 like a mom. She looks:
 Scared
 Worried
 Fritined
 Devastated
 Mad
 Disaster
 Hell – Not A BAD word.
 (It looks like this).
 Thay need safe things like
 Blankts, watr, food, a saf
 place to go.

Figure 1. Read the Pictures.

Carrie: Let's look up the hurricane information online. There may be some ideas about what we can do to help.

Bobby: And I can find more pictures. We can print them and add them to our book.

Andy: I want to draw some pictures about what it looked like in the 'Superzone'.

Becky: I want to work on my safety book.

M: Great ideas. Before you work on your projects, I'd like to take one more look at this picture. I think it is important that we try to understand how hard it was for the people in New Orleans, especially the poor and the African American. Let's see if we can act out what is going on here. Based on what you know about New Orleans and the hurricane, what characters would be in our drama story? Who wants to be the mother [Carrie]; the young child [Ronna]; the baby [Becky]; rescue worker [Andy]; the store owner [Bobby].

[The children proceed to act out their interpretation of running for safety to the Superdome (a huge, covered sports stadium used as a shelter during the hurricane) as the flood waters rushed into the city.]

Analysis of the dialogue

M's students were accustomed to finding information on the Internet; drawing their interpretations of stories; writing in their reflective journals; and deepening comprehension by dancing, singing, and acting out events in stories read or heard during read-aloud time. In this dialogue, the children's comments reflect their emerging understanding of the dangers of being caught in a hurricane and the flooding that followed. They showed their learning in various multimodal ways, unique to their own interests and abilities. For example, Bobby focused on the illustrations and text in his science book to inform the group about the eye of the hurricane. Becky was more comfortable writing an informational piece to inform others about how to be safe, and Andy drew his interpretation of the hurricane and described being trapped in what he called the 'Superzone' (Superdome, Figure 2). Ronna preferred to dramatize her understanding and Carrie responded to M's cue and began to 'read' the pictures, initiating the group writing of words to describe their interpretation of the cover of *Newsweek* magazine. Carrie was also the one to suggest using technology to find more information online about ways to help.

In the weeks to come, Carrie began sending e-mail messages to P to keep her informed about what was occurring on the days she was not in their classroom. She suggested websites with information about the hurricane, and by the end of the year Carrie was the student who helped move the group into taking social action.

These students were using multimodal tools to construct and share their learning as they explored a critical issue of great national importance. In the process they were expanding their awareness of what it means to be a good citizen and what their responsibilities were as citizens to help others. The questions M and P asked were part of the process of critical framing, positioning the students to begin to recognize that there are racial and cultural inequities in the country, and that taking some kind of social action to make a difference is important and possible, even at their young ages.

Orchestrating this dialogue, M worked to create a learning community that valued each other's contributions by explicitly verbalizing her observations of the different ways in which the students were constructing meaning about the hurricane. This also provided an opportunity to reinforce the concept that 'reading' encompasses more than print and that the students were

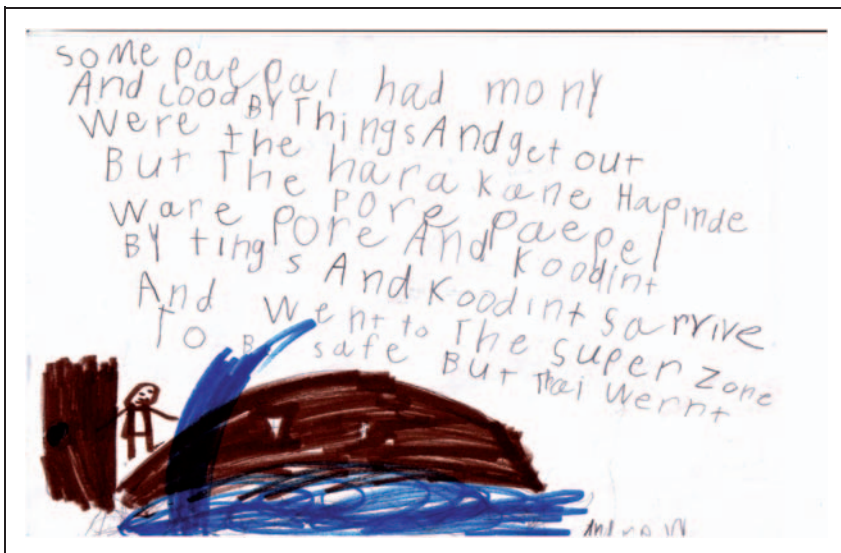


Figure 2. Andy's drawing of the Superdome.

Some people had money and could buy things and get out when the hurricane happened but the poor people were poor and couldn't buy things and couldn't survive and went to the Superdome (Superdome) to be safe but they weren't.

constructing meaning as they used multimodal tools to engage in critical inquiry. Within the Hurricane Group, we saw that the complexity of their learning exceeded the district curricular goals for their grade and age. They were beginning to assume a critical literacy stance and think more broadly, beyond the traditional curricular focus on local communities and neighborhoods. These students were using knowledge from their own families and from their shared learning to try to understand the impact of having to leave one's home and possessions. M and P encouraged the students to consider the people left behind who became victims of the hurricane, and to take some kind of social action to make a difference.

Taking her lead from Vasquez et al. (2004), M asked her Hurricane Group students questions about the victims of the hurricane. Who was left behind? Why do you think this is so? What do you think could be done about it? Through these questions, M hoped to raise the students' awareness of the racial issues that were so visible to us in all the newscasts, articles, and photographs of the victims of the hurricane. She knew it was important to go beyond just 'feeling sorry' and begin to see who the victims really were. The Hurricane Group students still did not see that the people left behind were primarily African Americans who had lived in New Orleans for many generations, and were part of the fabric and culture of this diverse city. We wanted them to not only recognize the racial issues that existed in New Orleans, but also begin to deconstruct and understand the social issues in their own neighborhood, communities, and even the classroom.

We did not want the children to merely try to make a difference – although that would have been sufficient and already more than the mandated curricular objectives. We wanted them to see their roles as caring citizens who could make choices about the way they lived their lives; to be discerning consumers of information; meaning makers who understood the power of language to position others unfairly; critical thinkers who recognized that there are political, economic, and social issues guiding most decisions; and that important questions needed to be asked that revealed various perspectives. In short, we wanted them to become critically literate right from the beginning of their schooling, and to learn to read the world while they were learning to read and reading to learn.

Connecting and expanding the curriculum

In the weeks following this early dialogue, the students in the Hurricane Group continued to take control of their learning as they immersed

themselves in hurricane information from the news, television programs, magazine pictures, and Internet websites. Rather than being assigned a role by the teacher, their participation evolved as they each found a meaningful inquiry opportunity within the larger study of hurricanes. They were designing and redesigning their investigation and assuming agentive identities and stances. They understood that information came from a range of sources in a variety of modalities, and they involved their parents and community connections to help them gather information.

The Hurricane Group wanted to share their learning with the rest of the class and M provided time for them to meet and work on their projects during language arts. At the same time, M added her own social justice component to the district's mandated language arts and social studies curriculum to include the whole class in a deeper exploration of African American history, literature, culture, music, and art. This intentional critical design provided ways to make diversity and difference more visible to all the children and helped them begin to ask critical questions about the world, examine their own assumptions and beliefs, and start to take on new identities that would support social action (Leland and Harste, 2004).

M used critical framing as she designed activities that allowed the entire class to find critical potential across the curriculum. As she read aloud to the whole class, M used 'think-alouds' (verbally analyzing her thinking about a story for the students to demonstrate how she was processing information). She also encouraged the use of art, drama, and music to more deeply examine and reflect on topics of interest that were being studied. M felt it was important for all of the students to understand that the arts, as well as language, could be used to position people in positive or negative ways and could be interpreted from different perspectives for different purposes.

For example, the class listened to M read the story of Ruby Bridges, the young six-year-old girl who became the first African American student to attend an all-white school in New Orleans in 1960. Several students researched the incident on the Internet, writing down information to share, and the class discussed what Ruby must have been feeling as the white adults and children shouted at her when she entered the school. The whole class tried to understand the story from different perspectives as they discussed why the white people were so angry, and wondered why Ruby did not yell back at them. M encouraged the class to act out the story events, and after choosing different roles, students showed by their words, gestures, and facial expressions, the kinds of feelings represented by their characters. They listened to jazz music, wrote and illustrated their ideas about the story, and

discussed how they felt the event might have been resolved differently. While drama, music, art, and writing are common activities in primary classrooms, M used these multimodal means to help students construct a deeper understanding of a complex racial issue, and to gain greater insight about perspectives and points of view.

To document all the students' learning about important social issues and to provide a visible representation of artifacts reflecting their work, a visual audit trail, or learning wall (Vasquez, 2003) (Figure 3), was created on the bulletin board outside the classroom. The word 'resist' was prominently featured in the center of the board, reflecting the students' emerging awareness of the power of words and the potential for change when taking a critical literacy stance. Along the bottom of the board was a timeline of African American history in the USA, which the children illustrated with cut-out figures and thought bubbles that conveyed a significant comment relevant to each character. There were also student-authored stories, reports, illustrations, and personal reflections about the social issues they had studied throughout the year. Whenever possible, the students proudly took



Figure 3. The Audit Trail.

turns guiding visitors (other classrooms as well as adults) through the chronicle of their learning represented by the audit trail artifacts on the board outside their classroom.

The Hurricane Group remained a tightly knit group throughout the year, continuing to research and meet together whenever they had a break in the day or choice-time opportunities. They continued to be interested in the hurricane as a weather phenomenon and followed the news online, but it was not until the group shared their artifacts and their research with the entire class that we saw evidence of how these five children were changing and being transformed. This group of children, with the help of the technology teacher, put together a slide show of their learning and their enthusiasm spilled over into the whole classroom, challenging the rest of the class to join them and find a way to help the hurricane victims.

Following the group's lead, M offered opportunities for the other students to join the Hurricane Group in figuring out how to make a difference for those affected by Hurricane Katrina. With M's guidance, each member of the Hurricane Group joined other newly formed groups within the class as they divided up the work to find out more about families affected by the hurricane, environmental issues related to flooding, how animals were affected (pets, zoo animals), and what happened to the schools. As all the children in the class read (books, encyclopedias, newspapers, magazines), viewed (pictures, websites, Internet sources), listened (to podcasts, music), discussed, and dramatized situations (improvisation, reader's theater), our transcriptions showed evidence that certain students were taking on the language of critical literacy and working toward social justice. The data also showed that in addition to the Hurricane Group, other children were also asking critical questions posted in the room, using words like 'resist' (visible on the audit trail board) and talking about the need to do something to show that they cared about the victims. Throughout all this learning, M kept reminding the class that it was important to live their beliefs, and encouraged them to do something to demonstrate their commitment to help. Always in the lead, the Hurricane Group took on M's challenge, as shown in the following segment of the group's discussion during the last month of school:

Carrie: We started out being sad and now we're mad.

M: What do you mean?

Carrie: Well, we were sad because people lost their homes and couldn't go to school. The poor people were left behind and they were not helped by the rich people who left and they weren't helped enough by the government.

Bobby: Yea, it wasn't fair.

M: *What do you mean?*

Bobby: It wasn't fair that a lot of the black people couldn't leave because they had no money.

Ronna: I wonder if they played jazz and blues in the Superdome because that music showed their feelings and made them feel better.

Andy: They had to learn to resist and be powerful so they could get out if it happened again.

P: *Resist what?*

Andy: Resist living in a house that could fall apart in a storm; resist people telling them they can't leave; or find a way to get out before the storm – to ask for help.

Becky: Yeah, like when Ruby Bridges went into the school even though the white kids didn't want her to. She didn't let them tell her she couldn't go.

M: *Why don't you all turn and talk to a partner and discuss what that must have been like.*

M [after a few minutes of students talking to each other]: *So, what did you all talk about?*

Carrie: We were thinking that since there were no other kids, Ruby could have her choice of reading any book in the school. But then we wondered if the books in some schools got ruined in the hurricane.

P: *Actually, as you know, I was a teacher in the same school Ruby Bridges attended and I know that school flooded badly. So what do you think we can we do to show we care and to help? I heard that a lot of schools have no books – or very few.*

Carrie: We could bring in some of our own or have a book sale to raise money.

Bobby: I could bring some of my books from home to send to them.

Ronna: Maybe we could sell cookies.

Andy: Well – I have books to bring in too, but I have to ask my mom.

M: That's a great plan. Let's write letters to our parents to tell them that we want to send books to a school in New Orleans since their books were lost in the hurricane.

Carrie: But no torn books or dog-chewed books. These have to be nice.

M: OK. Gently used books – in good condition – letter to the parents – anything else?

Carrie: Yes, we need to find a school we can send them to – I'll look online for one.

P: I'll work on that with you, too.

Becky: I'll write an e-mail to the school custodian for some boxes.

Carrie: And I'll organize the class to pack up the books and tape the boxes.

Andy: I'll make a poster for the hall.

Ronna: And maybe the student council could announce it to the whole school.

M: That's a great idea. Good for you! It could be something that other classes might like to take on. Definitely talk about it at the student council meeting. So you think we, as citizens, have a responsibility to help others? What are we learning here?

Carrie: Well, we learned about the victims of the hurricane as well as what a hurricane is. We also learned that it was mostly poor and black people who couldn't get out and we can do something to help.

Analysis

In this dialogue segment, M continued to urge the Hurricane Group members to articulate their thinking and make their ideas and beliefs visible for further discussion. Their comments show an expanded depth of understanding about African American history and culture, and active use of a more critical vocabulary in their everyday language (e.g. fair, resist). They were making connections between important African American people (Ruby Bridges), and taking on a social justice identity, exemplified by Carrie's passionate discussion about

fairness and resistance to oppression. They were eager to share their plans to help the hurricane victims with other classrooms, and were articulate in answering M's reflective question about what they were learning. Their conversation reveals significant shifts in their understanding about the devastation of hurricanes and greater understanding of prejudice and poverty.

Carrie set the tone of the dialogue, comparing her feeling of first being sad and then being mad. She expressed the idea that it was sad that people lost their homes and were not helped by 'rich people' or the government, and that she was now 'mad' that even weeks after the hurricane, so little help was made available. Bobby followed up with his comment about lack of fairness and Andy suggested that they should have learned to resist and become powerful enough to get the resources they needed to get out of New Orleans or get help to start rebuilding. Always pushing the students to think about taking social action, M and P suggested that they think about what could be done to help, which led to the book collection project. M reinforced their understanding by helping the students reflect on the purpose of the book collection as a culmination of what they had learned during the year.

When opportunities are provided for students to engage in dialogue, there is the potential to take a particular position or talk about new ways of being in the world. In this example, M helped the students think about social issues, to take action, and to consider how their behaviors could make a difference. In turn, the students, under Carrie's leadership, positioned themselves through talk and shared experiences to take on the final book project. Through their actions, they were beginning to recognize the power they had individually and collectively to take charge of their learning, and to make decisions about accomplishing their goals, and completing their work in a productive, engaging way.

To get this project underway, the class decided to bring in 'gently used' books from home to send to a school in New Orleans. M wrote a letter to the parents (Appendix 1) and each child also wrote a letter to their parent(s) explaining what they wanted to do and why (Appendix 2). As dozens of books came pouring in, the Hurricane Group organized the collection and packed them up in cartons. Through the Internet, M found a first grade classroom in New Orleans that was happy to receive the books from her classroom. On the last day of school, all the children addressed the boxes, included a class picture, and wrote individual letters with words of encouragement to the recipients, and M sent the boxes off to New Orleans. As M wrote in her journal,

'Starting with the Hurricane Group and spilling over into the whole class, the children's commitment to take action and make a difference, to write letters to

their families explaining their project, and to engage in such a massive book collection project, were testimonials to the students' learning and emerging understanding of their rights and responsibilities as compassionate citizens'.

Transformed practice

The Hurricane Group became a critical community of practice in the classroom (Brennan, 2006; Crafton et al., 2007). This community began with a small group of enthusiastic first graders, inquiring into a timely, important topic. Over the course of the year it grew to involve the entire class and their parents, as not only the students, but we researchers, the teacher, and also the curriculum were transformed. The important work done by the Hurricane Group resulted in more than feeling a sense of accomplishment about doing something about a social problem. This work helped students begin to take on the identities of thoughtful, caring citizens, providing them with an opportunity to think from multiple perspectives and to consider difference as an invitation to grow beyond themselves (Vasquez et al., 2004). It helped us to recognize the potential for multiliteracies and critical literacy to support, challenge, and expand learning in today's world.

During the year of research about Hurricane Katrina, our data showed us that the students in the Hurricane Group were taking on critical identities as they became involved in social action through their classroom inquiry. They also learned that working together while engaging in social action was a personally meaningful endeavor and that it was what people do in a socially just world. By the end of the school year 2005/06, these five students had learned about researching, using technology to help solve problems and answer inquiry questions, working together, supporting each other, feeling empathy for people in the world, and recognizing that they had an obligation to reach out to others and do what they could to help those in need. They knew how to ask and answer important questions, to use technology as a significant literacy, and to read beyond the word, picture, gesture, or symbol, as they read the world (Freire, 1998).

While this experience was transformational for the Hurricane Group, our data showed that the excitement about learning and doing 'really important work' (student reflection) affected all the children in M's room. We could also see how assuming the leadership in this unit of study gave the Hurricane Group a sense of importance about what they were learning and provided the impetus and purpose for studying something meaningful

from a global perspective. Two years after Katrina, the students in the Hurricane Group still considered themselves an inquiry community and had not forgotten the lessons learned in their first full year of school.

We wished that M had been able to keep her students for more than one year, to sustain the momentum toward critical inquiry. But from taped conversations with the students during the lunchtime reunion in M's room, and formal and informal conversations with the current teachers of these students, we recognize that at least three of the five Hurricane Group members have internalized and continue to develop a strong sense of social activism. They see themselves as capable, worthwhile citizens, armed with a commitment to honor differences and consider various perspectives as they live their lives.

As a powerful example of transformed practice, Carrie, now a third grader, became a student council representative and continually suggested meaningful service projects. For example, she wanted the district's 'make a difference day' to consist of more than ethnic costumes, posters, and special food. She wanted every day to make a difference in her classroom and befriended two non-English-speaking children, recruiting friends to play with them and join her in reading to them in English during recess and lunch. Carrie also suggested a 'peace table' to negotiate conflicts, and helped her teacher set it up. We believe this connection with social justice was due, at least in part, to her learning in M's first grade classroom and her involvement in the important work of her community of practice, the Hurricane Group. To this day, she keeps in touch with P and M by e-mail and is always eager to meet with us to talk about her life and her accomplishments, or meet with the Hurricane Group and relive their exciting learning experiences.

What we have learned so far

Analysis of our wealth of data indicates that young children bring foundational knowledge of multiple literacies when they come to school and they are already using them in multimodal ways; that social learning engagements provided through communities of practice can support developing knowledge that is authentic and meaningful; that young children are capable of critical inquiries, especially when these inquiries move from the local (classroom) to the global; and that these critical inquiries can enhance and deepen the traditional curriculum, providing opportunities to use multiliteracies in significant ways to accomplish social justice goals.

Through the two examples of the Hurricane Group discussions, we illustrate our findings of the various ways multimodal tools are used for authentic learning. As the Hurricane Group students interacted together within their community of practice, they worked toward accomplishing a shared endeavor, using multiple literacies interchangeably to accomplish particular tasks needed to fulfill the shared goals and objectives of their learning community. Together, they found the means and support to develop a plan for taking significant social action, moving from passive learning to agency. We knew from theory and confirmed through experience that 'agentive learning best occurs in the process of actually accomplishing a valued task or participating in a valued activity . . . there must be an expectation that literate activity can meaningfully accomplish something' and through choices of various forms of representing, 'authors construct not mere reflections of reality, but selective versions of it from particular points of view' (Dozier et al., 2006, p. 17).

During our data analysis, it became apparent that there is the need to reposition critical literacy from being just one of the multiliteracies, to an overarching presence as a significant, integral part of all literacy engagements. While the large, extended units of learning that lead to big events and significant action are very important in the learning process, we saw that the small, everyday engagements were also significant in the students' transformation to caring, critically involved individuals. Our analyses of taped interactions, student artifacts, field notes, reflections, and writing, demonstrated that 'talking is social action. When we interact with children through language, we are involved in the structuring of their intellect and their developing identities' (Dozier et al., 2006, p. 22). M intentionally presented critical questions and used critical vocabulary as she read to the class and reflected on alternative meanings; assumed different perspectives; wondered aloud about representation, fairness, and responsibility; and gently invited all the students to take action to make a difference. Through her instructional modeling, we saw the children begin to follow her lead, first in the Hurricane Group and then the entire class, as they worked to find a way to help the victims.

We learned that teaching for social justice and critical literacy can become an integral part of most curricula, even in the earliest grades, and that mandated instructional agendas do not always mesh with the needs or interests of the children. It is important to reframe the required curriculum to connect with student and teacher areas of interest and expertise, as well as those unexpectedly occurring critical incidents that can be catalytic in creating teachable moments of great significance (Crafton, 1991). Through critical framing, the teacher can open up space in the curriculum for supporting

and designing critical connections to everyday life, student experiences, and the world beyond the classroom. We believe there is a need to resist and modify mandated curricula that position students merely

‘as consumers rather than participants in their education. In a consumer model of education, students never get a chance to think, reason, and act like a mathematician, a historian, a psychologist, a geographer. They simply memorize what others have already found out’. (Lewison et al., 2008, p. 17)

A more productive solution is to enable the students to engage in inquiry opportunities to investigate the big ideas available in the curriculum, and also those questions that emerge through the inquiry process that can be even more meaningful and transformational to the students.

Conclusion

The hurricane inquiry illustrates the ability of a small group of primary students to work together collaboratively, using a range of multimodal resources, supporting each other’s endeavors, and taking on a social justice identity. As this group learned more about the hurricane and gained an understanding of the circumstances surrounding the victims of this disaster, it was possible to expand the existing curriculum so that all the students could participate in a deeper exploration of African American history, including the suffering and racial prejudice, as well as the many contributions to American culture over the last century. By the end of the year, motivated by the leadership assumed by the Hurricane Group, the entire class enthusiastically became involved in a collective social action experience to help make a difference.

All learners, regardless of age, need the opportunity to access tools and explore identities that will help them as they design their social futures. ‘What we need are new tools for thinking with, new frames in which to place things, in which to see the old and the new, and see them both newly’ (Kress, 2003, p. 8). There is a need for additional research in early childhood classrooms to better understand ways of expanding narrow views of literacy to include digital technologies, the arts, and other multimodal means of constructing meaning. Teachers need to be able to provide curricular engagements that encourage even young students to take on social justice issues and to engage in more complex forms of assessment that help teachers and the students themselves understand that their actions and behaviors reflect who

they are in the world. We also need longitudinal data that follow students through the elementary grades to provide greater insight into the impact of multiliteracies classrooms on student learning, and increased support for a multiliteracies curriculum that also includes critical literacy. The ultimate test of learning is in its lasting impact on students' lives.

We believe that our work with multiliteracies as an expanded view of literacy practices brings new insights, and impacts education in positive, powerful ways that enhance a basic reading curriculum. Our research has shown the importance of engaging primary students in authentic, critically focused learning experiences, using multiple semiotic systems to support personal inquiries in meaningful ways. Through a multiliteracies curriculum, there is greater potential for helping young children become critical readers, to be aware of the need to care about the world, to envision possibilities of freedom, and to have the knowledge and courage to take action to make a difference. As Bomer and Bomer wrote, 'We want children to carry with them into the world the image of how to make peace, how to reject racism, how to help someone who is in trouble, and how to guard the earth' (Bomer and Bomer, 2001, p. 58). We believe these lessons should be a visible component of all curricular engagements that start from the beginning of a child's education and never end.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a grant from the Spencer Foundation.

Notes

1. All student names have been changed to protect their privacy.

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Appendix I. Parent letter from teacher

Dear Parent,

Your child is bringing home a letter requesting that s/he donate a special book to a school in New Orleans. This book will go directly to a first grade student and will include a special message from your child. The boys and girls are selecting a book that they have read and that has special meaning for them. You do not need to buy a new book. The idea is to give something of ourselves.

Tragically, Hurricane Katrina happened at about the same time that our school year began. The children were interested in hurricanes as natural disasters and understood that its victims needed help. A small inquiry group of interested students formed back in September and began learning about hurricanes.

The questions this group posed, 'What is a hurricane? How can we be safe in a hurricane? How can we help its victims?' became a starting place for deeper learning connected to this year's social studies curriculum including economic topics such as needs and wants and learning about rights and responsibilities as we explored what it means to be a citizen and live in a democracy.

I used this year to build capacity: to help our young learners see that many of the victims of the hurricane were poor and African American. From our work with Dr Martin Luther King, Ruby Bridges and others, we learned that historically, groups of people have had to fight for their rights. We have learned

that we have both rights and responsibilities. Students explored what it means to care and the power of words like freedom, courage, and love.

The small group that began this inquiry has expanded to include all the members of our class as we are now connecting this event with environmental issues and a continued focus on civil rights and social justice. Your wonderful children are amazing and we are learning so much about each other everyday. Thank you for supporting our learning and helping us to make a difference in the world.

Sincerely,
Mrs B.

Appendix 2. Parent letter from child

