

# “It’s all ‘bout tryin’ to make ev’ryone sames”



Vivian Vasquez and Mariana Souto-Manning

## New NCTE Assembly Will Continue the Conversation on Young Children and Learning

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Visit the NCTE website <http://www.ncte.org/annual/ecea> to find out about the Day of Early Childhood at the 2009 NCTE Annual Convention, and about the many sessions devoted to issues of teaching, learning, and young children.

In Mariana’s first-grade classroom, William and Johnnie participate in a conversation with their classmates:

William: We don’t need no medicine. No fixin’! My momma be takin’ good care o’ me.

Johnnie: Wat you mean?

William: It’s all ‘bout tryin’ to make ev’ryone sames; but same’s white; same’s rich. I’m black and I live in the project.

(Souto-Manning, 2009, p.51)

In this exchange the children capture the deficit perspectives often employed in schools (Souto-Manning, 2009), that advantage primarily white children, whose families have socialized them into the same discursive world practiced in most schools.

Similarly, in Vivian’s preschool classroom, Patricia and Alexandro problematize the lack of diverse books in their school library (Vasquez, 2009, p. 1), and what this means for children whose life experiences are therefore rendered invisible in the school curriculum.

Patricia: Are you sure you looked?

Alexandro: Everywhere in there!

Patricia: She [the librarian] even helped me. She said, “I guess we don’t have any.”

Alexandro: Did you tell her that’s not fair?

The brief conversation between Patricia and Alexandro took place one day after returning from a visit to the school library. They had been looking for a book on the Philippines as one way to support Emma, a new student in the class, whose

family had just moved to Canada from the Philippines. Their quest was met with frustration when they learned there were no books with characters who might be Filipino, nor were there any resource books on the Philippines.

In both settings the children were learning about the notion of being “other,” of not having spaces and opportunities to belong. These children, ages four to seven years old, in different spaces and places were taking on longstanding, and deep-seated social issues of racism, power, and control.

Topics such as the issues dealt with by our students may seem too difficult or complex for young children. However, in both settings the children had available to them, from the beginning of the school year, more powerful ways of talking about the world, as both of us framed our teaching from a critical literacy perspective. (For more on critical literacy see resources at end.)

These children share the same underlying sentiment expressed by Goodwin, Cherevu, and Genishi.

“It should not be surprising that (in) the 21st century, the rhetoric regarding children and their care has perhaps changed (or become more child-centered), but the concern and focus remain the same—the ‘disadvantaged’ need programs and policies that are aimed to improve life chances” (Goodwin, Cherevu, and Genishi, 2008, p.5).

Rather than dealing with broader societal issues of inequality in which the school exists, and programs and policies such as No Child Left Behind, which maintains such inequalities, blame is pointed directly at schools and educators.

## A Community of Support

The two of us have been fortunate to have met each other, and each have had support groups of like-minded colleagues with whom to think and engage in ongoing conversation regarding young children and learning. In the company of others we have managed to carve out spaces to engage in the kind of critical teaching practice we believe supports diverse learners.

It was in this spirit of creating communities of support that we decided to work alongside other early childhood educators such as Susi Long and Jean Ann Clyde, to imagine possibilities for coming together more formally as a group interested in literacy and young children.

At the Annual Convention in New York City in fall 2007, a group of early childhood educators and enthusiasts gathered to design a plan of action. The result was the decision to propose an Early Childhood Education Assembly. Just over a year later, this Assembly was voted into existence by the NCTE Executive Committee.

Therefore, in spite of the challenges we continue to face in our educational settings, we believe this is an exciting

time for early childhood language and literacy educators of the National Council of Teachers of English!

The ECE Assembly of NCTE works to support and integrate the efforts of NCTE constituents concerned with language and literacy issues in early childhood education. Our hope is that this Assembly will:

- encourage field-based research and theorized practice in the teaching of Early Childhood Education across cultural and linguistic contexts;
- work to enhance teaching and learning in Early Childhood Education within and across diverse communities;
- sponsor professional development opportunities for those interested in language and literacies in Early Childhood Education;
- provide opportunities for early childhood educators and researchers to learn from and support one another;
- promote the articulation of thoughtful early childhood literacy practices;
- promote collaboration across professional organizations that focus on the education of young children;
- support new teachers in early childhood education; and
- encourage and sponsor the publication of articles, books, and reports focused on early childhood topics and issues.

This Assembly is especially important due to the pervasive mandates to implement practices that are antithetical to what we embrace as supportive of young children’s literacy learning. Teachers of very young children are asked to teach-to-the-test in ways that take away opportunities for holistic, thoughtful, play-oriented practices that allow children to construct knowledge through contextualized and purposeful experiences.

We know that teachers and teacher educators need support. We are especially interested in supporting early childhood teachers and teacher educators with a strong emphasis on promoting thoughtful practices that enhance the teaching and learning of young children within and across diverse communities.

To begin this work, at the 2009 NCTE Annual Convention in Philadelphia, there will many opportunities to attend sessions focused on ECE issues and topics, including a Day of Early Childhood Education, with opening Keynote speakers Sonia Nieto and Mary Cowhey.

We also are having a Workshop to be held on Monday after the Convention. Through the workshop we will

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examine ways to revitalize reading instruction with our youngest readers across diverse cultural contexts. Participants will learn strategies for children in preschools, kindergartens, and primary grades as they choose from a range of exciting areas of focus for the day of learning.

Workshop consultants and/or session leaders include Anne Haas Dyson, Celia Genishi, Julia López-Robertson, Gloria Boutte, George Johnson, Maria Paula Ghiso, Vivian Vasquez, Mariana Souto-Manning, Susi Long, Dinah Volk.

For more information on how to join the ECE Assembly visit our website at <http://eceassembly.blogspot.com/>.

We look forward to working with you!

## Related Readings

Goodwin, A.L., Cheruvu, R., and Genishi, C. (2008). Responding to Multiple Diversities in Early Childhood Education. In Genishi, C. and Goodwin, A.L. *Diversities in Early Childhood Education*. New York, N.Y.: Routledge. Pp.3-10.

Souto-Manning, M. (2009). Negotiating culturally responsive pedagogy through multicultural children's literature: Towards critical democratic literacy practices in a first grade classroom. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. Washington DC: Sage Publications. Pp.50-74.

Vasquez, V. (2009). *Getting Beyond I Like the Book: Creating Space for Critical Literacy in K-6 Settings 2nd Edition*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

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