“Lunch Is Gross”: Gaining Access to Powerful Literacies

Joined by a large group of parents and community leaders, my students chanted, “Lunch is gross! Lunch is gross!” as they picketed in front of their urban school district’s central office building (see Fig. 1). Later that night, the students made eloquent and passionate speeches to a standing room only crowd arguing for a change in their school lunch program. This rally was the culmination of a focus unit in my fourth-grade classroom.

Literacy learning in my classroom was far more complex than disseminating the basal program and test prep workbooks my urban district adopted for skills-based instruction. A sociocultural framework (Street, 2005) for literacy learning offered me a theoretical context for valuing and integrating students’ cultural and social knowledge to create authentic literacy learning. For the past 10 years, I have documented and argued for the importance of authentic classroom lessons to teach literacy practices necessary to succeed in school, participate in life outside of school, and build social relationships across time and space (Gatto, 2001; Gatto & Hart, 2000; Larson & Gatto, 2004; Smith, Larson, & Gatto, 2006). Literacy practices in this view are goal-directed activities that use “particular technology and particular systems of knowledge”

Figure 1. Students protest lunch choices in front of the school district office.

School food has long been the butt of jokes, and these jokes seem to have no boundaries. From rural to urban schools, students complain similarly about the food served in the cafeteria. Of the students in my class, 89% receive free/reduced lunch and live in low-income neighborhoods that are often identified as food deserts, where access to affordable and nutritious food is limited (USDA Economic Research Service, 2009). I noticed that students in my class chose to go hungry rather than eat the cafeteria food. School lunch was no joke to them.

A Critical Approach to Literacy Learning

With the vision of an authentic literacy learning activity, I prompted my students to “do something” about the school lunches they continually complained about. Initially, it never occurred to me that school lunch would become the impetus for my students to develop powerful literacy practices. In the quest to make literacy learning more authentic, I created the Lunch Is Gross project for critical literacy learning. This ethnographic study documented how authentic literacy experiences expanded my students’ existing literacy practices in order to construct and use new ones in critical ways (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000).

Drawing from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2001; Kincheloe, 2008), critical literacy focuses on the construction of social relations, identity, knowledge, and power through text (Luke & Woods, 2009). Critical literacy positions students and teachers as active participants in writing and reading the world (Freire, 1994) and engages them in “becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). Critical literacy practices also provide students with experiences that afford them opportunities for participating actively in the world and producing knowledge through voice (Giroux & Simon, 1989). It is through the development of individual and collective voice that students learn to name and change their reality (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). Voice is conceptualized as spanning,

... literal, metaphorical, and political terrains: in its literal sense, voice represents the speech and perspectives of the speaker; metaphorically, voice spans inflection, tone, accent, style, and the qualities and feelings conveyed by the speaker’s words; and politically, a commitment to voice attests to the right of speaking and being represented. (Britzman, 1989, p. 149)

Building upon critical pedagogy, Janks (2010) orients critical literacy as an interdependent relationship between diversity, domination, access, and design. She argues that it is this relationship that allows learners to consume and produce literacy as it relates to language and power. The Lunch Is Gross project engaged my students in unpacking the relationship between power and language by asking complex questions about race relations, resource inequities, and institutional politics, and then designing a new text in order to change their social future.

Throughout the unit, students were afforded opportunities to critically read a wide variety of texts, noticing the ways in which language positioned, maintained, and reproduced relations of domination. The students interacted with many audiences, which gave them access to dominant language practices while also valuing their own diverse language and literacy practices. This access to dominant language practices provided students with a comfort level in diverse discourse communities. Critical literacy became a space for “using and selecting from all the available semiotic resources for representation in order to make meaning, while at the same time combining and recombing these resources so as to create possibilities for transformation and reconstruction” (Janks, 2010, p. 250).

It is through meaning-making and communication of those meanings that design affords students opportunities for voice and agency. The design of a new text within a critical literacy framework offers a dynamic process consisting of “subjective self-interest and transformation” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, p. 203). The critical literacy practices in the Lunch Is Gross project moved my students to an understanding of how power shapes and is shaped by language in the form of text, speech, and multimodalities.
To explore how critical literacy practices emerged from the Lunch Is Gross project, I videotaped many of the associated literacy events. Using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), I mapped and coded the data corpus consisting of classroom videotapes, student work, classroom artifacts, my field notes, and a student-made documentary. The classroom artifacts included a lunchroom journal, co-constructed charts, and copies of emails. Three conceptual categories of critical literacy practices were constructed during the initial analysis of data: 1) attentive, 2) connective, and 3) disruptive. In attentive practices, students become aware of voice in consuming and producing texts, while in connective practices, texts become a vehicle for agency. Disruptive practices have students bringing voice and agency together to use text for transformation of their world. Common to each of these categories is the understanding that language and power influence the world, or as Freire (1970) called it, conscientização or critical consciousness. These categories are further explicated as the Lunch Is Gross project is described.

An Urban School and Its Lunch Program

My students lived in a western city of New York, ranked 11th highest in child poverty in the nation. The school district of approximately 32,000 students was considered, after New York City, the poorest achieving school district in the state. According to the latest data available, our district had only a 52% graduation rate. This data inflames the negative image of urban school populations, but my heterogeneous class did not fit the stereotype of urban students. Unlike the common perception of urban classrooms, the daily attendance and test scores for this class were high, and most parents attended classroom celebrations.

I looped for three years with this class of students. Looping is the practice of keeping the same group of students with the same teacher. We began second grade together and remained together through fourth grade. The long-term relationships developed through looping contributed to a strong sense of community between the students and me. Looping allowed us to co-construct a critical literacy project that spanned across the three years we were together.

Over the course of the project, 22 students remained from the original 24 students. The class reflected the make-up of the mid-sized urban school district in which they lived. All but three children received free and/or reduced lunches. The class included 7 Latino/as, 12 African Americans, and 5 European Americans. Among those 24 students, 7 received support services for ESOL or special education, and 2 were medically diagnosed as behavior disordered but received no services. Six of the children had already repeated a grade.

In our first year together, a schoolwide decision was made to abolish the recess period connected to lunchtime. In spite of the fact that recess supports learning (Jarrett et al., 1998; Toppino, Kasserman, & Mracek, 1991), our school abolished it due to curriculum and scheduling constraints. Given that I considered recess an important component for both academic and social development, I decided to eat lunch with my students and then take them outside for recess as soon as they finished eating. It was my own decision to give up my “duty-free” lunch period, so no one minded. In fact, the lunch staff and administration appreciated having one fewer class to supervise in the cafeteria.

The school’s lunches were delivered daily from the district’s central kitchen where they were prepared. A private company was contracted to operate this service. The hot entrées were delivered by 10 a.m. and then reheated in the large ovens at the school kitchen the same day. The hot entrée, which included the main dish and a vegetable, was served in individually covered aluminum trays. Often delivered the day before, the cold sandwiches were wrapped in cellophane and the fruit was loose in a cardboard box. Each day I witnessed most of the students walking straight to the garbage can from the food service line to throw away their unopened trays of food. “You have got to eat lunch,” I would implore them. “No, the food is nasty,” “Yuck,” “Gross,” and “This apple is rotten,” were just some of the responses I received.
Lunch Provides Opportunities for Critical Literacy

I was frustrated that so few children were eating lunch, so I challenged them: “We have to do something about this.” They offered a multitude of ideas and raised many questions. They wanted to know why the fruit was either rotten or unripe. They were frustrated with the limited menu choices. They expressed anger with the taste of the food. They couldn’t understand why they were forced to take food they weren’t going to eat. I raced to capture their words on chart paper. They wanted the school lunches to change, and collectively we decided to create a video clip, “so everyone could see just how gross the lunch food is,” as one child stated. They felt that if they showed a video clip of the unhealthy and unappetizing food served to them, this video would prompt the superintendent and the board of education to change the lunch fare.

To help children envision the type of video clip they might create, I showed selected segments from the documentary Super Size Me (Spurlock, 2004) as a model. We learned about key elements of documentaries, including point of view and supporting details. One student commented, “We shouldn’t just make a video clip, we should make a documentary!” An eruption of student conversation began, and we concluded that we would produce a documentary to show at a school board meeting.

We left in June with a plan to begin our third-grade year by writing, scripting, and producing our documentary. I spent the summer developing authentic learning activities connected to the documentary. As their teacher, I was committed to having my students meet or exceed state and district standards. Most districts in New York have adopted curriculum and programs designed to prepare students for high-stakes tests, and mine was no exception. Instead of using the prescribed textbook lessons and workbook practices my district supplied, however, I considered the individual students, planned carefully, selected appropriate materials and activities, and adjusted lessons to students’ questions or ideas. This is not to say that I ignored the curricular expectations; instead, I wove the standards into my literacy instruction (see Table 1). I felt these were the important aspects of establishing a successful literacy program.

When the fall started, I planned to spend six to eight weeks in this unit; however, the project lasted much longer. A friend of mine was a team manager for an international market research company located up the street from our school. When I told her about our project, she invited the class to visit her office and meet with her team. Members from the research company shared tips on effective survey writing and worked with the students in small groups to write survey questions about their food project. Together they wrote questions to find out if the rest of the student body felt the same way they did about the school lunches.

We were also invited to stay for lunch in their corporate dining room; students selected their

RESOURCES FOR NUTRITION PROJECTS

In an effort to respond to the need for healthier school lunches, many states have adopted farm-to-school programs. These programs match local farmers to local schools and provide comprehensive lessons, demonstrations, and farm tours for children. Many of these programs were started by teachers and parents. What a great way to get students involved in local policy, inquiry, and critical literacy!

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a list of resources, including implementation handbooks, recipes, activity books, nutrition information, and menu planning. See http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/farm-school/local-resources.

The National Farm-to-School Network has programs in every state in the US. See http://www.farmtoschool.org/ to find resources, a nearby program, and leads for funding sources.

—Lynn Gatto
lunches from a menu of fresh salads, hot soups, wraps, sandwiches, and fresh fruit. As a result of this corporate dining experience, the students’ vision for school lunches expanded, and they wanted to engage in social action. Students wrote letters to every teacher requesting permission to administer their newly constructed survey. Then they developed a master schedule for classroom visits and presented the survey to over 300 students. They tallied and graphed the data, and then contrasted and compared the results.

There were also opportunities for the students to use a critical stance toward the social construction of texts (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Vasquez, 2001, 2004). For example, when one student mentioned that his friend in a suburban school loved his school lunches, another student proposed going to see a suburban school cafeteria and the lunches served there. We identified a nearby suburban elementary school and searched their district website for the names of the fourth-grade teachers. We sent the teachers an email, explained our project, and offered a lunchroom exchange. We suggested they invite us for lunch in their cafeteria and they, in exchange, would visit us in our cafeteria. My students wanted to make comparisons and validate their findings with the students from the suburbs.

About a week later, we received a response from the principal of the school; it informed us that “they did not want to participate.” I displayed the email response on the SMARTBoard. The students tried to make sense of the principal’s use of language as this transcript demonstrates.

1. Mrs. Gatto: (reads from the email) “The staff can’t help you.”
2. Student 1: “The staff can’t help you?”
3. Student 2: “Can’t we just go over and taste the food?”
4. Mrs. Gatto: (reads from the email) “We are unable to participate, not able.”
5. Student 1: “Why?”
6. Student 3: “If other kids called with a project she would probably do it but not with us.”
7. Student 4: “Why won’t she let us?”
8. Student 3: “Maybe she didn’t want us interrupting the teaching.”

### Table 1. Project activities that address state standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authentic Literacy Practices</th>
<th>State Standards</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Write letters to teachers requesting time to administer surveys.</td>
<td>Read grade-level texts with decodable and irregularly spelled words at appropriate speed, accuracy, and expression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write email letters to suburban school teachers to visit and view their lunches.</td>
<td>Communicate ideas in an organized and cohesive manner.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email request to board secretary for getting on Agenda.</td>
<td>Speak with expression, volume, pace, and facial or body gestures appropriate to the purpose of communication, topic, and audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email school board members and superintendent with link to Teacher Tube posting.</td>
<td>Vary the formality of language according to the audience and purpose for speaking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administer surveys to every class in the school.</td>
<td>Speak with expression, volume, pace, and gestures appropriate for the audience and purpose of communication.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop questions for interviews (lunch ladies, other students, and nutritionist).</td>
<td>Acquire new vocabulary by reading books and other print sources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deconstruct the news show format, pamphlets and magazines for elements of the genre.</td>
<td>Use text structure to recognize differences among a variety of texts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compare lunch menus across school districts.</td>
<td>Compare and contrast similarities and differences in information from more than one informational text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use teleprompter to read scripts.</td>
<td>Read with confidence from a variety of grade-level texts with appropriate speed, accuracy, and expression.</td>
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</table>
This conversation demonstrates that the students grappled with the way the principal used language in her written response to us. In line 2, Student 1 responded to the principal’s statement “the staff can’t help you” by questioning the meaning (“The staff can’t help you?”). He wondered about this statement because we had not requested help from the staff, nor had we written to the principal. Student 2 suggested in line 3 that we should “just go over there and taste the food.” Student 2 either did not understand that the principal had denied our class access to the suburban lunchroom, or she clearly understood the principal’s message and wanted to ignore it. I clarified by rereading, “We are unable to participate” (line 4), emphasizing the word unable and then reiterating the meaning by saying “not able.”

The principal did not disclose her reason for declining our request. Students 1 and 4 questioned her decision by responding “Why?” and “Why won’t she let us?” Student 3 clearly viewed the principal’s rejection as having something to do with who we were when he stated, “If other kids called with a project she would probably do it but not with us.” Although there was no uptake on Student 3’s comment, the students continued to construct other reasons for her refusal to grant our request.

McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) remind us that “critical literacy helps us to move beyond . . . passive acceptance and take an active role in the reader–author relationship by questioning such issues as who wrote the text, what the author wanted us to believe, and what information the author chose to include or exclude from the text” (p. 6). Thinking of critical literacy in this way provided these students with an attentive stance as we read the principal’s email and co-constructed a replay as it was projected on the screen. The refusal to grant our lunchroom exchange request did not deter the students. Instead, they questioned her negative response and then researched and compared the monthly lunch menus of various suburban school districts to their own.

Suburban school menus from nearby districts were posted online, and we compared them to our own urban district. The students studied and compared the graphic design of a school’s monthly menus. Their own district menu was posted on a pastel background and listed the daily fare. In contrast, the suburban menus were multicolored and decorated with messages about healthy eating, a seasonal greeting, a joke, or interesting facts with accompanying pictures. As we compared and contrasted the various menus, students observed, “They really care about their kids”; “It’s real better there than in the city”; and “It’s not fair.”

In questioning the principal’s email and the schools’ monthly menus, students engaged in attentive critical literacy practices. They attended to these texts, conceptualized the voices that created these texts, and discovered that texts are never neutral. Instead, they are written with voice, or the “speaking subject’s perspective, conceptual horizon, intention, and world view” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 51), whether the menus are written in the principal’s or the Web designer’s voice.

**Video Production as Design**

The activities described above became part of the documentation that students collected, and also became material for writing their video script. The students selected a news report format for the video, informed by their knowledge of nightly news broadcasts. To demonstrate documentary writing, I introduced the concept of storyboarding using a long sheet of mural paper with boxes drawn across it.

Mrs. Gatto: So how do we start?

Student 1: You know like in a story it has a lead sentence to grab them in? We need one like that for this.

Student 2: (jumping up and down) We’re trying to change the lunches. To get the school board to change the lunches.

Student 3: We need better lunches.

Mrs. Gatto: OK that’s good. (I write down, “We need better lunches.”) Now we can begin
to give our details for the rest of the video. We need to tell them why we need better lunches.

It took three days of conversation to construct a storyboard (see Fig. 2). Its prominent location on the wall guided our work and anchored us to a common goal over the course of the project. The storyboard helped us to visualize the project into clips, transitions, backgrounds, shot locations, and titles.

There was still much to do if we were going to accomplish this project by the end of third grade. We developed “To Do” lists, idea charts, video shoot plans, and job assignments. Using Internet searches and the phone book, we located local nutritionists and pediatricians and contacted them through emails, phone calls, and written letters to request information about the dietary guidelines for children. Students wrote interview questions for the cafeteria staff and designed the news broadcast format of the documentary. Finally, the students took turns using a DVD camcorder to record in the cafeteria and the kitchen. I contacted the manager of the nearby television station to request a visit to the newsroom. Not only did we visit the newsroom, but he arranged for us to meet with the broadcasters who shared on-camera skills with the students, such as eye contact, expression, camera cues, and body positioning. The manager also allowed us to use the newsroom studio for filming parts of our video, placing our scripts on the teleprompters.

Once all of the video clips were filmed, we began the process of editing. As the students selected and sequenced scenes to create the documentary, they connected with the concept of agency, especially in terms of audience and purpose. They saw that they had the opportunity to influence and perhaps convince the school board to make changes to the school lunches through their video.

One clip from the documentary exemplifies students’ sense of agency. A Latina student looks into the camera, then into the tin foil tray of that day’s lunch, and delivers a spontaneous description of the food:

1. This meat is cold and the fork can’t even break all the way through it.
2. And look at the smooshy vegetables that Tyler was talking about.

**STORYBOARD FOR DOCUMENTARY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title (Picture of lunch food)</th>
<th>Students complaining about the food (In the lunchroom)</th>
<th>Breaking news—State the purpose (In the newsroom with banner running across the bottom)</th>
<th>Show the data (In the newsroom with reporters)</th>
<th>Hear from the experts (Background of our city on the whiteboard)</th>
<th>Compare the school lunch to a healthy lunch (Speaker off camera)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show the suburban lunchroom</td>
<td>What makes a healthy lunch? (Speaker off-camera)</td>
<td>Our song about fruits &amp; vegetables (Back in newsroom)</td>
<td>Suggested solutions (Each explorer will say something)</td>
<td>Rolling credits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Split the screen to show ours)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**MAIN IDEA**

Give Examples

Possible Backgrounds:

- Map
- Fruit basket on the desk
- Yellow tape around the lunchroom "crime scene"

- Fabric from our class box
- Fruits & vegetables

**Figure 2.** Students collaborated on their first storyboard.
3. Look at 'em. (She holds the tray out and peers into the camera.)

4. They say this is Spanish rice.

5. But it’s not.

Through her scrutiny of the school lunch in lines 1 and 2, she verifies that the lunches are gross. She demands that the audience see what she sees by her direct stare at the viewers, the tray in front of the camera, and her statement “look at ‘em” (line 3). Using her own cultural experiences, she challenges the food service company, “They say this is Spanish rice” (line 4), and argues they are wrong, “but it’s not” (line 5).

Making the documentary allowed the students to connect their own lives with the contexts of their classroom, school, district, and community. Unfortunately, even after numerous phone calls requesting a time slot on the school board agenda, we had not yet secured that slot by the end of the year. The board secretary continuously deferred us without ever actually denying us access to the board meetings. Before we left for summer vacation, we made a pledge to try again in September.

Immediately upon returning to fourth grade, the students contacted the school board secretary. By October, the students had not yet secured a place on the school board agenda. They began to realize that the board secretary was the gatekeeper to the meetings. One student asked, “Why don’t we just go to the meeting and make them watch the video?” I explained that we were following all of the regulations for getting on the board agenda, and that we would have to continue to follow those policies or find another way.

Students suggested and rallied around posting the video on YouTube. Since our school district blocked YouTube, I suggested we post it on TeacherTube (http://www.teachertube.com/), to which the students unanimously agreed. Together we wrote an email to the superintendent and board members informing them that we had posted our video to http://www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video_id=11129&title=LUNCH_IS_GROSS.

Within 20 minutes, the superintendent responded that he would be over to eat lunch with us the next day. The students and the superintendent ate lunch together, and he agreed with the students that the lunches were gross. He stated, “I wouldn’t even touch the salad with a ten-foot pole!” Back in the classroom, he heard more details from the students. Before he left, he promised that he would address this issue.

In his annual report to the community given in January, the superintendent spotlighted the importance of school food. He announced that the district would not renew the contract with the longtime service provider, and would instead be conducting a search for a new company to provide school lunches. The students were sure their video and interactions with the superintendent and board members had impacted this decision. Their use of critical literacy to design a new text had connected “themselves and their texts into public spheres” (Lensmire, 2000, p. 64) with the intention of making a change for their own lives.

Although the district had secured a new service provider for school lunches, there was no guarantee that the food would improve. A few weeks after the superintendent’s report, the newspaper published an editorial written by a well-known and respected pediatrician from our community. He argued that lunches served in the city school district did not give students access to proper nutrition. After reading the editorial together, the students and I drafted a letter to the editor in which we asked the community to view our video, and urged them to contact the school board about improving the school lunches. Our letter was published (Gatto and her fourth-grade students, 2008; see Fig. 3), and after a few days, numerous readers had posted comments on the newspaper’s response blog.

The students again became immersed in the role of attentive reader–author relationship as they read the blog comments about our published editorial. Although there were many who wrote in support of our editorial, there were also quite a few who did not. For example, one reader stated, “Well, if the kids are getting food for low cost or free, who are they to complain? I think they should be grateful for what they eat.” After reading the comments on the blog, I asked the students to write
We definitely agree with Sanford Rubin’s column “School lunches fail the students” (May 6). We are fourth-graders at School 28 in the City School District and we think most of the school food is disgusting. Our class created a documentary on the school lunches, titled Lunch Is Gross. We worked with Harris Interactive to write a survey. We gave the survey to our whole school and then we graphed the results. We also interviewed the lunch ladies and other adults who sampled our school lunches to find out their opinions.

We learned about healthy food and made suggestions as to what we would like to see in our school lunches. Our video can be seen at TeacherTube.com (put Lunch Is Gross in the search box). We hope many people will see our video and call the school board to complain or offer to help.

We really think our school food should be nutritious and tasty. We would love to have salad that’s not dried out, fruit without rotten spots, vegetable soup and simple sandwiches like grilled cheese and peanut butter. We need help to step up for our right to be healthy.

Signed by Lynn Gatto and her fourth-grade class at School 28.

Lynn Gatto, fifth from the left, top row, poses with her fourth-graders at School 28 in Rochester.

Figure 3. Our letter to the editor was published in the newspaper.

their reflections. Understanding the implication to their poverty in some of the comments, one student wrote in his reflection, “I feel really bad because people don’t care about what we eat. They make it sound like if they give us food from the trash that we should eat it.”

Another critic of our editorial wrote on the blog:

This is absolutely heartbreaking. I pay a boatload of taxes and bring my own lunch instead of eating what’s in my cafeteria at work, and you want me to contribute to your school lunches and to pity you for your nasty lunches? Sorry, not gonna happen. Why don’t you just pack your own lunch? Maybe if Mommy and Daddy cared more they could make you a brown lunch bag like my Mommy and Daddy used to make me :)

One student’s reflection spoke against this critic: “My mom takes care of me. It’s not fair that you complain about what our parents are and aren’t doing for us. My parents love me very much.” Another student wrote, “My parents take good care of us!” Yet another wrote, “I bet you wouldn’t let your children eat what we eat.” In their reflections, some of the students referenced their own poverty by writing, “If you lived in our shoes, you would probably see why we don’t eat the school food and don’t bring lunches to school.” These students responded to the comments about their video and its message with a critical eye. They understood that their parents, lifestyle, and economic situation were under attack.

The Lunch Is Gross video that was posted on TeacherTube was getting widespread play. Bloggers across the country wrote about our class project and linked our video to their blog sites. The local Health Foundation publicized our video and awarded us a Healthy Hero Award and a $500 grant. That next year, even though I retired from teaching and the students were no longer in one class together, we continued to meet once a week after school at the nearby public library. We used our Healthy Hero award to seed the publication of Healthy Kids magazine, which the library disseminated to the neighborhood.

It was also at that time that the local Health Foundation formed a coalition called Healthi Kids (http://healthikids.org/) with an agenda of change in public policy and food practices. They called for improved diets in and out of school and increased physical activity. The Health Foundation invited the students and me to become part of their grassroots
efforts to impact the contract negotiations between our school district and the new food service provider by lobbying for nutritious and appealing food. They asked the students to collect signatures for the community-wide petition. As the Health Foundation planned the rally, they asked the students for permission to use “Lunch Is Gross” as the motto for the rally. The students eagerly agreed and willingly participated by making posters and preparing speeches. At the rally, the students led the march, were interviewed by the media, and spoke to the school board in the standing-room-only crowd.

After the rally and school board meeting, the students and I held a celebration party. They felt vindicated and wanted to write letters to the school board. In their notes, the students’ voice and agency were apparent, as demonstrated in this one student’s note to the superintendent:

1. Thank you extremely much for listening to us
2. when we were ready to speak out.
3. Those lunches were dispickable [sic].
4. But now that you made up your mind
5. and finally putting 100% of your effort
6. to change the school lunches,
7. they will be better.

In line 1, this student tells the school board she knew they had listened to her. She also asserts her sense of our collective voice and agency when she articulates that we did not speak out until “we were ready” (line 2). This student does, however, directly reproach the school board for taking so long to listen to them when she emphasizes the word finally (line 5). She knows the collective efforts of her class have effected change for the whole school district when she ends with, “They will be better” (line 7).

These students engaged in critical literacy practices by disrupting the norm with their social actions. They designed their texts—speech, motto, and rally—to disrupt the existing power structure.

**INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITE THINK**

**Using Multimedia to Heighten Awareness**

The following resources from ReadWriteThink.org expand on the strategies and activities described in the article:

**3-2-1 Vocabulary: Learning Filmmaking Vocabulary by Making Films**

Bring the vocabulary of film to life through the processes of filmmaking. Students learn terminology and techniques simultaneously as they plan, film, and edit a short video.


**MyTube: Changing the World with Video Public Service Announcements**

This assignment will go viral with students as they think about the meanings of words and images in public service announcements from YouTube before creating a PSA of their own.


**Students as Creators: Exploring Multimedia**

Students are introduced to the genre of multimedia presentations through a review and analysis of online examples. They then apply what they have learned to create their own multimedia presentations.


—Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org
Through their disruptive practices of disseminating the video and joining in on the rally, the students combined their voice and agency for change that mattered to them.

The following year, when the students had moved on to sixth grade, a new food service provider began managing the school lunch program. The district’s school lunch program now offers a wider variety of fresh fruits and vegetables and other foods with high nutritional value. An attempt is being made to include authentic ethnic cuisine that would appeal to the African American and Latino students. The monthly menu sent home is now in color and includes pictures, jokes, holiday greetings, nutritional facts, and advice.

Students engaged in practices that demonstrated the three categories of critical literacy. They attended to texts sent to them (e.g., principal’s email) or posted online (e.g., menus, blogs). They disrupted the norm through their posting of the video online, and connected with the public through debates in the newspaper blog, leading a public rally, and speaking in public meetings. In this project, students identified an issue, questioned the powers behind the issue, and acted upon the existing power structure for social justice, with transformation as their desired outcome.

A Critical Literate Lunch

This critical literacy project recognized and applied the interconnected concepts of power, diversity, access, and design to the issue of school lunches in one urban district. The making of the *Lunch Is Gross* documentary was initially designed as a project for authentic literacy learning that would give students access to voice about an issue relevant to them. However, because of the sociocultural nature of this project, the consumption and production of a wide range of texts for identifying and challenging various discourse communities and power relationships emerged. Ultimately, a transformation of those communities and relationships occurred; the students had transformed the lunch program not only for themselves, but also for the 32,000 students in their district.

School food positioned students and the teacher as active participants in writing and reading the world (Freire, 1994), and engaged them in exploring together the relationship between language and power within social, historical, cultural, and political contexts. The *Lunch Is Gross* project demonstrates how school lunch became the means for classroom literacy lessons focused on issues of racism, inequity, poverty, power, and school/community politics. There were many opportunities for the students to make both personal and political interpretations through the connections between language, power, and literacy. The students and I engaged in critical literacy to “deal with the daily politics with which children identify” (Janks, 2010, p. 190).

The *Lunch Is Gross* project afforded my students an understanding of how power shapes and is shaped by language. Critical literacy became a way for my students to question and take action on the discourses and decisions that affected their everyday lives. This project was not without risk. As the design of the documentary took shape, I made a point to meet with my principal to inform her that I would be meeting standards within the context of this project. She valued the opportunities my students would gain and supported this project.

This was not the first time I presented a critical literacy project to the principal. In fact, over the course of 32 years, I submitted many such unit plans to my administrator. As a veteran urban teacher, I had a reputation for teaching in nontraditional ways, but because my students scored at or beyond grade level on standardized test scores, my average daily attendance was high, and I had won national awards, I was permitted to take risks.

The *Lunch Is Gross* project can inspire teachers who are willing to take risks and offer their students critical literacy that can be attentive, connective, and/or disruptive. The nature of local and situated practices in critical literacy pedagogy makes it difficult to replicate the critical literacy events in the *Lunch Is Gross* project. However, critical literacy projects can be designed around the significant interests and issues from students’ own lives, and position them to consume and produce literacy for social justice.
References


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