The Power and Possibilities of Performative Critical Early Childhood Teacher Education

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While early childhood education programs seek to provide the tools to work with children and explore content, many fail to address the social and emotional contexts in which early childhood education occurs. This is evident in the seldom addressed topic of collaboration between lead teachers and assistant teachers in the early childhood classroom. In this study, we found that as new early childhood teachers enter schools, they interact with teacher aides and parents daily, yet do not feel prepared for negotiating these professional adult relationships. These underlying tensions then affect children’s development and learning. To address such situations, we propose the use of Boal’s forum theatre (Boal, 1979) as a performative critical model for early childhood teacher education and support the advantages it offers for exploring issues facing early childhood teachers that may not be commonly addressed in teacher education classrooms. To illustrate the process, we present a case study of an early childhood teacher who participated in such a model of in-service teacher education and show how the process of reflection central to this performative process helped her address areas of conflict in her classroom and in her problem-solving strategies, especially those concerning lead teacher-assistant teacher relations.

Introduction: Revisiting the Traditional Model of Early Childhood Teacher Education

Throughout the country, traditional models for preparing early childhood educators focus on teaching methods and curriculum implementation (Hughes, 1999). This is evidenced by the way academic degree programs are designed—grounded in social studies, science, mathematics, and language and literacy methods which are then brought together in a curriculum integration course (Anderson, 2005). In preparation programs, early childhood educators learn about developmentally appropriate practices, implementing curricula, and teaching strategies. Education programs give teachers the tools to work with children, but often not with the social and emotional contexts in which early childhood education...
occurs (NAEYC, 1993). Specifically, new teachers are often not prepared to see themselves as leading the classroom with one or more teacher aides—a defining factor in early childhood education programs and classrooms where teachers must negotiate relationships with other adults daily in order to ensure optimal education for the children. Thus, current models of early childhood teacher education often leave teachers unprepared for the possibility of clashing educational paradigms, childrearing beliefs, and personal characteristics (Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Larkin, 1999).

In this article, we discuss the use of Augusto Boal’s forum theatre (Boal, 1979). We specifically focus on one application of his Theatre of the Oppressed, as a performative critical model for early childhood teacher education and we explore the advantages it offers for negotiating issues facing early childhood teachers (cf. Hildebrand & Seefeldt, 1986; Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995; Manlove, 1994; Warnemuende, 1996) that may not be commonly addressed in teacher education classrooms. We present a case study of an early childhood teacher who participated in such a model of in-service teacher education. In doing so, we show how the process of reflection central to such a performative process helped her address areas of conflict in her classroom and in her problem-solving strategies. Findings indicate that by engaging in teacher education that is both performative and critical, teachers feel energized and less stressed. They start seeing conflicts and stressful situations as sites for change and transformative possibilities.

Challenges & Possibilities: Collaboration between Lead and Assistant Teachers

It is commonplace in early childhood classrooms that lead teachers will work with assistant teachers due to the combination of low teacher–student ratio requirements, lack of available physical space and the cost effectiveness of pairing lead and assistant teachers to meet ratio requirements (Currie, 2001). While such arrangements are common and cost effective, relationships between lead and assistant teachers are rarely discussed at length in early childhood teacher education programs.

As we sought to learn more about early childhood teacher education program approaches, we analyzed the course syllabi and program structures of 20 early childhood teacher education programs in Research I institutions throughout the country. All were built on content area methods courses. Of these, we interviewed six teacher educators representing six distinct teacher education programs in large Research I universities on the East Coast, in the South, and in the Midwest during the month of March, 2007. While we realize that this sample will not yield statistically significant data nor is it representative of the universe of early childhood teacher education programs in the United States, we present our data here merely to illustrate that our concern about addressing the relationship between lead teachers and other adults as part of teacher preparation is important because it is a fixture of the workplace for which new teachers are rarely prepared.

Like our program, the other 20 early childhood preparation programs that make up our sample follow a very similar model (see Figure 1).

As seen in Figure 1 and documented by several researchers (Porfilio & Yu, 2006; Tom, 1997), such programs are very top-down and solution oriented. They are based on monologues—professors are perceived as the holders of knowledge that must be mastered by students in order to become competent early childhood educators. Curricula and syllabi revolve around traditionally defined texts, which often become the voice of authority. The outcome of such models of early childhood teacher education is similar to what Boal (1995) described
as a form of Aristotelian catharsis: education that is “disempowering and tranquilizing, [adapting] the individual to society” (pp. 70–73) rather than empowering and agentive.

We are not assuming here that all programs follow the exact model described above, yet according to our analysis, at least 20 teacher education programs in Research I universities embody these phases and/or steps. By adhering to such models, new teachers come to rely on assigned texts and classroom discussions and accept a subtle message that there is a specific protocol or procedure for each situation (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001). In early childhood teacher education classrooms, there has been concern that multiculturalism is too often text-based; students read and feel a cathartic release, discussing discrimination based on race, class, gender, and other social oppressions through text. Nowhere do they have the experience of any active social engagement (Rhedding-Jones, 2002; Rust, 1999). The model we present here refutes the idea of a specific protocol for each situation, challenges text-based ways of dealing with oppressive situations (Figure 1), and presents an empowering way to rehearse and engage in active social engagement on personal and societal realms (Figure 2).

**Critical Theoretical Framework**

In this article, we employ a critical theoretical framework. Critical theory seeks to challenge human oppression and “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). It embodies explanatory, practical, historical, and normative components simultaneously. “That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation” (Bohman, 2005, ¶ 3).

Using the lens of critical theory, we see social inquiry as practical knowledge. This entails perspective taking, exploring the relationships between inquirers and actors, and in this specific study, inquirers-as-actors. Engaging in interpretive social science allowed us to ascertain the power of interpretation as practical knowledge. From this perspective, critical theory enables the initiation of the public process of self-reflection (Habermas, 1971) and praxis, and thus promotes change and transformation (Freire, 1970).
A Critical Performative Approach for Early Childhood Teacher Education

Research studies have suggested a high rate of teacher burnout and stress particular to early childhood education (Hildebrand & Seefeldt, 1986; Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995; Manlove, 1994; Warnemuende, 1996). In this article, we propose that critical performance can be a mode for opening up an array of possibilities and perspectives which move new teachers away from thinking and feeling that they are powerless to change conditions that limit their professional lives. A performative model for early childhood teacher education has the potential to help with the identification of patterns of interaction situated within relationships laden with power differentials and confined by social norms (Alexander, Anderson, & Gallegos, 2005). By making discursive and behavior patterns a point of rehearsal and revision, performance can promote agency and lead to transformation at the personal and/or societal levels.

**Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed**

Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979) was established in various applications in the 1960s by Brazilian theatre director and political activist, Augusto Boal. Inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire (1970), Boal incited political action at a time when Brazil was under the control of two different military dictatorships. Boal’s theatre troupe was performing plays aimed at promoting dialogue and consciousness among peasants in disempowered rural areas. After a show in the Northeastern region of Brazil, a spectator, so moved by the performance and convinced by the play’s revolutionary ending, asked the actors to take their rifles and go with him to the streets (Boal, 1995). As a result, Boal (1995) realized theatre could arouse the public to immediate social action. He wanted to create an aesthetic experience in which those who perceived themselves as powerless in society could be in charge of generating their own solutions, judging their realities and consequences, and arriving at collective action. Thus, Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979) was born to theatricalize and problematize everyday realities through embodied action.
The Origins of Forum Theatre in South America

While experimenting with nontraditional theatre methods in Brazil, Boal developed a more engaged and interactive performance called “forum theatre”, one of several applications of Theatre of the Oppressed. Rather than respecting the fourth wall, the invisible barrier separating actors and action on stage from the audience, Boal conceptualized the spectator as an active participant in the performance. Motivated by Freire’s call to blur the boundaries between student and teacher roles, Boal invited spectators to become spect-actors, a hybrid of spectator and actor. Spect-actors became a common part of Boal’s experiments, as those suggesting alternative courses of action were invited to step up and replace one another, thereby taking turns playing the role of the oppressed-protagonist themselves (Boal, 1979, 1995). When performing the suggested change, spect-actors came to feel empowered and started conceptualizing themselves as agents—as subjects who could act upon and change oppressive situations, rather than objectified victims of other people’s actions. Forum theatre is facilitated, or in Boal’s term “difficult-tated” (Boal, 1995), by a person in the role he calls “the joker.” The joker stimulates and generates participation, and throughout rehearsals asks spect-actors to decide whether solutions posed are realistic or possible. If not, the group collectively decides to rehearse and perform other possibilities for action. Theoretically, by reflectively dialoguing about suggested courses of action, participants collectively become empowered, rehearsing for real change in their lives. Through its various applications, Theatre of the Oppressed became a tool, a medium for activism, or in Boal’s words, a “rehearsal of revolution” (p. 141).

Theatre of the Oppressed in Early Childhood Teacher Education

Based on Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), and aimed at challenging and transforming oppressive situations through praxis, Boalian theatre can bridge critical theory with classroom practice as it offers an alternative platform for examining underlying assumptions in social interaction (Howard, 2004). We posit that Theatre of the Oppressed (T.O.) can serve as a tool to counter traditional forms of education oriented toward single answer solutions, and teacher as isolated individual. As exemplified in the case study presented in this article, T.O. may serve as a framework for critical performance, sensitivity to diversity, and positive change in early childhood teacher education.

By encouraging problem posing rather than finite solutions, and dialogue rather than monologue, we believe Theatre of the Oppressed could alter early childhood teacher education in a significant way. This directly connects to situations experienced by early educators, such as the struggles between early childhood lead teachers and assistant teachers. As professionals experiencing instances of recurrent oppression, early educators have the opportunity to employ T.O. to challenge situations and rehearse change in their own lives. Like Boal, we believe that a description and enactment of power relations can reveal what disables teachers in moments of communicative conflict in their professional lives. It can serve as a tool to promote positive change in their professional lives.

We understand that there are no fixed single and simple solutions to conflicts, but a gamut of perspectives and possible solutions which are based on interactional contexts and stances. We understand that “the ways that people interact . . . depend on context—the frameworks for interpretation—that people bring to those experiences. . . . Context is itself a complex concept, whose meaning is not fixed” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 5). The context for learning moves toward embodied sites of practice where education is transitive—that is, the experiences of teacher participants inform and influence teacher educators and
vice versa. The collective practice of Theatre of the Oppressed becomes a rehearsal for real social action in teachers’ lives, especially in the context of the early childhood classroom where educators are often in constant collaboration with other adult educators. In addition, it is developmentally and culturally appropriate as it uses teachers’ experiences as points of departure.

Boalian Theatre and Classroom Conflict

Borrowing from the literature on family functioning, two caregivers who are in conflict may have an adverse impact on how children act and react (Katz & Gottman, 1996; Katz & Woodin, 2002; Margolin & John, 1997; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). Usually, an assistant teacher is assigned to a lead teacher by administrators, and the teacher must figure out how to navigate their relationship and deal with potential conflict. The literature has suggested that caregivers in conflict (especially those who ignore conflict or choose not to deal with it directly) are less emotionally available for interactions with children (Sturge-Apple et al.). In the case of a classroom with lead and assistant teachers in conflict, there is likely less emotional availability for the children. It is best for the children if adult teachers find viable solutions to conflicts and oppression. Because young children learn what they live, those underlying conflicts (whether overt or covert) can permeate children’s interactions and hinder their socioemotional development and creativity (Tegano, Groves, & Catron, 1999). Therefore, knowing how to deal with conflict while respecting perspectives is beneficial to early educators as well as to the children they serve.

New turns in the critical scholarship of possibility view conflict as dynamic, unpredictable, and filled with potential for change. Cowhey (2006) discussed the importance of embracing conflict to encourage critical and diverse thinking. In a performative approach, multiple solutions are presented collectively by spect-actors, leading to a respect for other people’s views and perspectives. Such a process is represented in Figure 2. By embracing a multitude of possible solutions and understanding the concept of multiple perspectives, teachers can better engage in diversity teaching when they see their own stances as culturally-situated (Rogoff, 2003).

A Critical Performative Model of Early Childhood Teacher Education

As represented by Figure 2, the critical performative process is cyclical and recursive, presenting five phases outlined below:

A. Generative Theme(s): The texts employed in the classroom are generated from the participants’ lives, narratives and experiences (Freire, 1970). These experiences represent situations in which they experienced recurring oppression.

B. Codification: Teachers codify their experiences as they select a relevant situation by scripting their narratives into a three-scene enactment portraying the oppressed person (Protagonist) and the person serving in the role of oppressor (Antagonist).

C. Spect-acting: As the antagonist and protagonist enact the scene, spect-actors can stop the action at anytime, replace one of the actors and improvise a new perspective, which is then interactionally validated or challenged.

D. Reality Check: As multiple instances of spect-acting occur, there is a reality check process that clarifies the situation, temperament, and identity of the protagonist.

E. Action: In this last phase, there is collective and individual plotting of action, both on the individual and on the societal levels.
This process may not be as linear as portrayed by Figure 2 as there is much back and forth negotiation and phases do not present finite boundaries. Theatre of the Oppressed differs from role playing as it is open ended and there is no definitive solution, but a multitude of possibilities. The key is to problem pose rather than problem solve at the onset. Edmond and Tilley (2007) explored how theatre goes beyond role playing as it more fully explores contexts and interactional nuances. Theatre of the Oppressed goes beyond simple theatre in that it allows for the possibility of rendering multiple performances (and therefore behaviors) of the same episode (which is generated from participating teachers’ experiences). In presenting and analyzing a representative case, we aim to bring the phases described above to life.

Developing and Piloting a Model

Developing such a process based on Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (Figure 2), we sought to develop a model that would benefit teachers on an individual and general level. On an individual level, this model is intended to provide teachers with the tools to reconfigure their own oppressive interactions. On a more general level, this model, which employs forum theatre, could offer a venue for exploring possibilities for context-specific change.

Both our inquiry and the construction of our model for critical performative early childhood teacher education were guided by the following questions:

1. Given teachers are socialized to speak, talk, and act in gendered, cultural, racial, and/or classed ways, how can embodying and problematizing oppression through spect-acting convey more depth and breadth to conflicts experienced by new teachers?
2. In what ways might a critical performative approach provide a unique contribution to early childhood teacher education?

To explore such questions, data were collected over a period of 4 years (2004–2008) as part of a larger project to answer questions about effective practices for the recruitment and support of minority and nontraditional, bilingual pre- and in-service teachers. The larger research project looked at teachers of students from early childhood to adulthood. While all participating teachers were bilingual, the data analyzed for this article is limited to the effect of such a model on early childhood teacher education. Other studies (cf. Cahnmann, Souto-Manning, & Rymes, 2005; Cahnmann-Taylor, Souto-Manning, Wooten, & Dice, in press; Rymes, Cahnmann-Taylor, & Souto-Manning, 2008) explore more general aspects of the larger study. These studies report the effectiveness of such a process model for bilingual teachers in general.

As outlined by Figure 2, the process works in the following manner:

1. Participants share their narratized struggles with the collective (generative themes).
2. The collective dialogically decides on a narrative that is representative of some of the oppressions they experience in their own particular contexts and the selected narrative is broken into three scenes by the collective (codification).
3. The sequence of three scenes is acted for the first time. At any time during the rendering of the situation, any of the participants can trade places, acting simultaneously as both spectators and actors (spect-actors). Possible solutions and/or perspectives are presented through acting as spectators trade place with actors. Several reenactments happen (exactly how many depends on the time available); as per our experience, spectators can come up with multiple solutions and we have not experienced any instances
in which spect-actors ran out of solutions before two or three hours had elapsed. The process is cyclical and recurring (spect-acting).

4. As different solutions are presented, the author of the narrative is given the right of refusal by performing a reality check and answering whether that specific suggestion could be real and applicable to the particular context (reality check).

5. After the session, teachers take perspectives and possible solutions that they deem real and apply them to their particular contexts (action).

The teachers on whom we focused were participants in a program called TELL (Teachers for English Language Learners) funded by the U.S. Department of Education Transition to Teaching Program. TELL was designed to recruit and support bilingual adults to become K–12 teachers in Georgia high-need Local Education Associations (LEAs). As we developed our performative model, we focused on the high rate of teacher burnout mentioned earlier in this article and sought to support the retention of such highly qualified professionals in high-need public schools. Between the years of 2004 and 2008, we met every semester (one to four times per semester, totaling 16 sessions), employing the critical performative approach to teacher education. In the first semester (Fall 2004), we divided participants into four smaller groups (4–6 each), holding a number of sessions per semester (one to four). Subsequent semesters included larger groups (18–34). Participating educators chose the session that best fit their schedule, attending one time per semester. As a rule, one session was offered during the week and another on the weekend to accommodate those who had to travel farther distances. These sessions lasted 2 to 5 hours. In Fall 2007, and Spring 2008, we held five sessions that included a reflective component and yielded a state-granted professional development unit (PDU).

This critical performative approach was employed to address situations in which bilingual teachers felt oppressed. There were clear instances of oppression between teachers, teacher and administrator, teacher and family, and teacher and assistant teacher. Cases in which the oppressive situation involved teachers and assistant teachers all related to early childhood settings. Topics explored via this approach involved (but were not limited to) accent, cultural expectations, stereotypes, behavior management, and motivation. Due to the prevalence of conflict situations between teachers and assistant teachers as presented by our early childhood teachers, for this article, we selected the case study which represents three cases of interactions between teacher and assistant teacher; the corpus of data presents a variety of conflicts explored as outlined above.

Video and audio recordings of the discourse that took place in group meetings as well as a follow-up debriefing interview with Sonia (pseudonym), the focus participant, were transcribed and analyzed. At first, in analyzing the data collected, we wanted to compare observations and video footage. We grouped data into categories (Dey, 1993) and then compared them against the processes proposed by Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and by Boal (1979) in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. The process of constant comparison “stimulates thought that leads to both descriptive and explanatory categories” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 341). We employed the constant comparative method to identify common behaviors and phases that occurred across cases.

We wanted to see which categories and processes were common throughout the actings and episodes. Pieces of text termed “incidents” were compared to each other and to categories (Dey, 1999). Categories represented common and consistent phases in which participants engaged as they embodied this critical performative approach to teacher education. The constant-comparative method of theory generation incorporates coding, writing memos, theoretical sampling, and sorting or delimiting the theory. By engaging in
this process, we were able to identify the processes employed by participants and came to
the realization that the process is much less linear than we initially imagined, as it is cycli-
cal and recursive.

**Analysis: An Early Childhood Educator Embodies Theatre of the Oppressed**

In this section, we analyze the specific case of a Sonia, a prekindergarten teacher. This
case represents the process of critical performative early childhood teacher education as
applied to a very important and seldom discussed topic—the relationships and conflicts
between lead teachers and assistant teachers in early childhood classrooms. Below, we
divide her talk and action according to the phases presented by Figure 2. These phases
were derived from the work of Freire (1970) and Boal (1979) and common across actings
as outlined above.

In her participation in Theatre of the Oppressed for educators, Sonia presented a prob-
lem to the forum that is common in early childhood education. This forum took place in an
empty classroom in the College of Education at the University of Georgia on a weekday
between the hours of 5 and 8 pm. Four other early childhood educators were present and
took the role of spect-actors. All participants shared instances in which they had experi-
enced recurring oppression in the professional realm. After relaying their narratives to the
group, the participants decided on one narrative that was somehow representative of their
own experiences and therefore would be meaningful and useful to each of them. Sonia
presented a case that could offer implications to all participants (Jensen, 1999). She was
having difficulty with her Assistant Teacher (TA) that was causing so much stress she was
feeling physically ill and not interacting well with students. Sonia felt her TA did not ful-
fill her duties and that the TA undermined Sonia’s authority in the classroom. She tried
confronting the TA and talking to the principal but none of the solutions she tried yielded
a satisfactory resolution. As she shared her struggle (phase 1: generative themes), many of
the participants were able to relate to the situation and her dilemma was selected and
codified (phase 2), authored into three scenes to be performed.

**A. Generative Themes**

Sonia was frequently put down and challenged by the assistant teacher who had more
seniority than Sonia at the school where they worked. The more experienced assistant did
not have the credentials to become a lead teacher, yet considered herself more knowledge-
able about how to best teach young children and involve families. As Sonia described the
situation of recurring oppression, she first described those actions of the TA that she felt
were inappropriate. Below, we present excerpts of Sonia’s description of her situation.
The excerpts have undergone minor editing for readability. The pronoun “she” signifies
the teaching assistant.

*Sonia: It all starts in the morning, when she comes in. It has been going on
every morning. She and her daughter, who does an internship in the school in
a different teacher’s room, come in. The first thing: they come in and go to the
computer and start e-mailing. The kids are there and they just ignore them.*

Sonia went on to describe her attempts at confronting the TA, asking the TA for help, and
explained how the TA compared Sonia to previous lead teachers, thereby showing the
group that the TA would not engage in discussion with her about changing the situation.
Sonia: When she comes [she] intimidates [me] so much that I say only half the things I have to say. I want to say “this is it.” I gotta talk to her. So, I even typed up the general job expectations for her, during this time I want you to do this and this and that. Then she comes in that morning and I said, “good morning” and she didn’t say good morning. Her daughter said good morning and my TA just looked at me like, “What’s the problem?” And I said, “I don’t like it. The minute you guys come in, you go to the computer. I don’t think that’s professional.” And she said, “But there’s nobody coming in.” And I said, “But my kids are here.” And then they just both left the room. And they never came back. And then the next day she didn’t come back. And then she came back the following Monday and we had an okay day.

Identifying these experiences, the group of new teachers decided to codify Sonia’s oppressive experience in three scenes and enact her situation. They recognized the prominence of such a problematic interaction as is common in early childhood classrooms—specifically to the dynamics between lead teachers and assistant teachers.

In further describing the teaching assistant, Sonia presented the following interactions, representing multiple realms in which Sonia felt oppressed:

1. The assistant teacher took charge and told Sonia what to do. She compared Sonia to previous lead teachers and drew on her longer tenure in their school:
   
   TA: Why don’t you put those chairs down? The other teachers did it. The other teachers that came before you.

2. The TA developed relationships with parents and talked negatively about Sonia to the parents.

   Sonia: I was really concerned about the trust issue. She said things to parents that undermined my ability to teach. She was telling them that, “Oh, she’s already changed her daily schedule three times.” Like that’s some indication of inability or lack of experience. Whenever I tried to adjust to the reality, tried to make it better, she didn’t see that I was trying to do better. She saw these changes as insecurity, and she spoke ill of me about those things to parents.

3. Sonia and the TA had different ideas about their respective roles in the classroom.

   Sonia: I said, “I consider that your job.” And she said, “Your job expectation is different.”

4. They had different beliefs about how to interact with children.

   Sonia: She even told me that I’m too nice to the kids, and I said, “That’s my way of dealing with the little children. That’s the way I teach the children.” But, her assertion was that I’m just a willing victim and, you know, that I just try to please the children, not teaching them.

As Sonia shared her narrative, multiple tensions were identified. The four interactions above were the most prominently articulated. Even though Sonia could share multiple
aspects of what she perceived as the assistant teacher attempting to exert power over her, Sonia was limited to acting out only one situation with the assistant teacher.

**B. Codification**

Together with the group of early educators in our study, Sonia identified the most recursive and representative situation as number 1 above in which the TA told Sonia what to do and compared her to previous lead teachers. Together, the participants of the group codified Sonia’s experience of oppression into three scenes, which were reenacted several times with different actions and reactions to determine what Sonia’s performative options were in moments of interactional conflict.

**C. Spect-acting and D. Reality Check**

Following deconstruction, the acting was redesigned in three scenes. Sonia, teacher educators Souto–Manning and Cahnmann–Taylor, and four other early educators acted as spect-actors.

The first enactment of the scene showed Sonia as the protagonist, but as spect-actors replaced both protagonist (Sonia) and antagonist (assistant teacher), multiple solutions were envisioned. At any point in time, any spect-actor could replace the protagonist or antagonist in the scene and provide a new perspective through experience. The scenes acted were as follows:

- **Scene 1:** Assistant teacher ignored Sonia’s and the children’s needs upon entry to the classroom.

- **Scene 2:** Sonia made a request to the assistant teacher for help.

- **Scene 3:** The assistant teacher compared Sonia to a previous teacher seeking to exemplify how good teachers act.

The perspectives and possible solutions the spect-actors first offered emphasized concrete actions for solving the problem. Several spect-actors performed Sonia documenting the TA’s behaviors in various ways (with a notepad, hidden video camera, etc.) in order to garner support from the school principal or to secure evidence to have the TA removed from Sonia’s classroom—perhaps moved to another school or fired. Another early educator performed Sonia offering the TA explicit instructions about her role in order to make her expectations clearer. Sonia engaged in a reality check with the group by questioning the feasibility of such solutions and explained why such performed solutions would not work in her particular situation and further refined and identified the underlying issue between her and her TA as an issue of power. The group changed the focus of their suggestions as individuals took Sonia’s (the protagonist) place and attempted to work on the power aspect of the interactions with the TA.

First, spect-actors suggested using what we refer to as *strategic subordination*. Here, Sonia pretended that she was playing along. As the scene was reenacted, Sonia again engaged in reality checks about their suggestions refining details of the situation. The spect-actors who took her place (early childhood teachers and teacher educators) acted out several scenes. The scenes presented below are representative samples from those enactments. As she engaged in reenacting the situation, as requested by one of the early educators, Sonia showed the group what she looked like when she was interacting with the TA, thus bringing the embodiment of the situation to the forefront.
In Scene 1, the spect-actors pretend to play along. Sonia clearly stated that this response would not work within this specific interactional context. While another assistant teacher might play niceties, according to her previous experience and to the context of the situation, this assistant teacher was not going to play along. So, while a solution was offered, Sonia’s reality check halted its applicability.

Scene 2: In this reenactment, the proposed solution is to attempt to blur the roles of teacher and assistant teacher. Though it did not seem as artificial as the previously presented solution, Sonia’s reality check suggested this was not deemed as the ideal solution.

Scene 3 presents a follow-up to the suggestion presented in Scene 2. As participants engaged in performing the scenes, they saw that pretending to play along could potentially be a solution to a situation of conflict and or oppression. This strategy was suggested again and again across cases over the years that we have been implementing this critical performative model in teacher education. In addition, as a collective, the spect-actors also suggested and acted out extreme possibilities for change. Such extreme performative possibilities often led to laughter. Indeed, parody was deemed useful across situations of distress to diffuse the seriousness of a situation.

E. Action

The group suggested that Sonia change the way she presented herself when she interacted with her TA in order to convey a position of strength. Initially, when interacting with the TA, Sonia’s posture slumped; she frowned, and looked down at the floor. Her peers noticed that her low voice and posture were positioning her as insecure, and nonagentive in the interaction. They encouraged her to stand tall and relax her facial muscles. Sonia immediately felt a difference.

Action occurred in this case study through the lead teacher’s subjective self-awareness, sense of empowerment, and taking action with new behaviors in the classroom. By acting out her experiences with the TA, Sonia described a realization that she had identified patterns of interaction (e.g., competition, bids for power, and knowledge) that may have perpetuated the negative situation. The hierarchy set up by the school district was seen as problematic by the assistant teacher who had more experience but fewer professional credentials. Confronting this issue and approaching such an interaction with the assistant teacher was problematic and nerve-wracking for Sonia. While the suggestion to merely change her body language was the only suggestion Sonia felt was realistic during the forum, she later reflected on her experience in the group as helpful because it was less solution focused and more process oriented. She felt there was something she could do. She changed her own stance, something of which she had control.

Following is her rendering of the situation and of the critical performative teacher education in which she had engaged as per a debriefing interview conducted months after her situation was selected. She recounted the process and the learning of the performative focus group. She also talked about returning to the focus group setting as a support structure that helped monitor the progress of one’s situation.

Sonia: What do I do? I bring my problem there. I act out my problem. I reveal myself, one layer after another and just peel [away] the anxiety. I let other people have it. And we share our emotions together, problems together, act it out. Sometimes you just don’t need words; you just use your body language and let all the problems out (laughs). And we discuss and seek the possible solutions together. And after each possibility, we act it out again. Until you feel
comfortable with some of those solutions that can help you deal with the problem afterwards. You come back again and discuss the progress, and act out again. And you are relieved from your anxiety and you learn from the process. And you feel better and you gradually solve the problem, or release it. At least, you release the intensity and tension of the conflict and you do better.

It was actually empowering for me to see different ways to deal with the problems.

Interviewer: What do you mean by empowering?

Sonia: Because I’m really subjective and then, I can only see one way, if I am focused on “Why, why, why?” But then, there are different reactions here and there, so I need to open up and widen my view, and there might be a reason or reaction coming from my TA, even if I’m the same person. If I see differently, say it differently, and, you know, act differently, show different body language, she might, you know, show a different side of her too. So, human beings have, you know, a lot of different sides, a wide range of thinking, so, we respond differently to different actions. Now I know that. So, yeah, it was kind of an empowering experience, yes.

In another description she described the process of opening up options.

Sonia: During the focus group, there are lots of options that you can think of; you know, some are realistic, some are not. But, you know, that gives you a lot of strategies that, “Oh! This might work. That might work.”

So, regardless of the reality of any one specific solution to the situation presented, Sonia articulated the need to consider the multiple facets of the human being with whom she was in conflict. She embraced the concept of humility. “Humility helps us to understand this obvious truth: No one knows it all; no one is ignorant of everything” (Freire, 1998, p. 39). Recognizing that she did not know all the facets and motives of the assistant teacher helped her. Furthermore, Sonia articulated the importance of developing a repertoire of options to deal with oppressive situations. Instead of feeling immediately oppressed, she could recur to these strategies and think, “Oh! This might work. That might work” as articulated above. This can serve to detract stress from situations that might otherwise be oppressive.

As per the interview data, this process is helpful not only to the particular person who shared the situation, but to others as well as they employ this as a tool to deal with conflict and oppression. As a result of this process, we have seen instances of change at the personal level (e.g., “I can deal with this,” “I feel so much better”) and at the contextual level (e.g., “I changed schools,” “I talked to the principal”). While change is not always immediate, according to debriefing interviews, it seems to happen at the socioemotional and affective realms as well as tangibly.

Discussion and Reflections

Using a performative critical process in early childhood teacher education, such as the one described in this article, opens up options for addressing issues common to teachers. Because there are multiple educators in the early childhood classroom, different
points of view about roles, teaching, and children are common. Sonia’s case highlights several of these common themes. Teachers can benefit not only from the support of a group and a feeling of collectivity but also from the process of reflecting on patterns of interaction.

As reported by Sonia during a debriefing interview, although acting can be challenging at first, it can ultimately be energizing and offer a way to diffuse the intensity of conflict situations. It can also provide possibilities for constant reality checks. Sonia’s case highlights the use of performative critical teacher education in accounting for and allowing for different worldviews and specific contexts. Traditional teacher models may not be able to tend to the nuances of individualities, cultures, and personalities. What works for one person may or may not necessarily work for everyone everywhere. Using Theatre of the Oppressed allows for recognition of multiple assumptions and presumptions in teaching and a realization that such multiple worldviews are not personal affronts, e.g. when Sonia rejected Scenes 1 and 2. It opens up the possibilities for using the teachers’ very experiences as cases to be analyzed and collectively explored. Such a performative approach has the potential to open up possibilities for addressing diversity in the classroom and in early childhood education in general, as it offers teachers tools for considering multiple perspectives and worldviews, e.g., Sonia’s acceptance of attending to the importance of body language.

The experience of acting might also offer a potentially comfortable atmosphere and lighter mood for exploring emotional situations. Sonia addressed the difference in acting out a problem versus talking about it. Below she articulated the importance of considering interactional contexts in such performative approaches, which are hypothesized in cases that might only be read in teacher education classrooms. The importance and power of real-time interaction in an unknown space (as each spect-actor does not know in advance how others will react) is one of the factors that makes such an approach so useful and powerful. It enables reality checks and constant reflection on and refining of the situation. Even when discussing one’s specific situation, Sonia, for example, saw more room for misunderstanding in talking.

Reflections on Practice

Long work hours and the high demands of early childhood teaching lead to challenges in offering in-service teacher education, which is often limited to after-school hours or weekends. While this is offered in challenging times, teachers see direct implications to their own practice, seeing a direct benefit of attending such professional development opportunities. Many teachers have reported feeling better, less stressed, and enjoying their jobs more due to the use of techniques explored in these workshops. They report relieving stress during the session and leaving with tools to transform their situations at their workplace in schools. We propose (as illustrated by Sonia’s reflection below and by many other teachers) that T.O. appears to offer a more energized and playful situation than traditional in-service teacher education (Tom, 1997). Sonia described the unique characteristic of T.O. having a different feel than other professional development.

Because of alternative possibilities a critical performative approach to early childhood teacher education opens up for action, the process of exploring conflict through theatre may be experienced as relieving rather than adding greater stress. In Sonia’s words, as you participate in this kind of professional development, “You are relieved from your anxiety and you learn from the process. And you feel better, and you gradually solve the problem, or release it, at least release the intensity of the conflict and you do better.”
Strategies employed by teachers include strategic subordination (pretending to play along), and parody (refusing to play along). Sonia described the experience of parody in acting as adding to her increasing comfort in dealing with such a difficult situation.

Sonia: I might not agree with everything, but, it was, there’s a comical touch too, that helped me relax about the real situation.

Other strategies were articulated in various situations over the years we have been doing this work. Some of them include: calling authority (e.g., calling a principal), keeping documentation (e.g., anecdotal notes, video footage), enduring the situation (often for a limited amount of time), forming networks, consensual subordination (playing along), and explicit insubordination (which often yields a parodic rendering). While not all of these are presented in this article, they were strategies performatively suggested again and again.

Reflecting on the practical aspects of employing performative critical early childhood teacher education, we find that it allows teachers to feel energized and less stressed as they leave, which is the opposite of so many professional development instances from which teachers leave with a long list of things to do. Like Sonia, teachers participating in this kind of professional development may be able to release stressful emotions and leave with greater conflict management skills in addition to feeling like a different person, energized and refreshed.

Implications

As there were multiple solutions proposed by spect-actors in Sonia’s situation, likewise there are many implications of being socialized into this kind of critical performative teacher education. Day in and day out, early childhood educators experience conflict, whether it is in interactions with a parent, administrator, assistant teacher, or student. Being socialized in habitual ways of speaking and acting in certain cultural ways, such as rigid interactional patterns and the culturally based beliefs regarding the needs of children in early education classrooms (Freire, 1970; Rogoff, 2003), can hinder an early childhood educator’s ability to consider multiple perspectives and needs in a moment of struggle. Instead of creating a “me against them” situation, embodying conflict through acting can convey more depth and breadth to the nature of a conflict, offering an array of solutions that may ultimately allow the early childhood educator to consider various actions that can modify a problematic situation. Sonia learned that by exploring expectations and realities around such relationships can be extremely valuable. So have many other teachers who participated in this kind of professional development.

It is with great hope that we share this process that may contribute in very unique ways to the education of preservice and in-service early childhood educators. Through multiple focus groups over the years, we have learned that embracing and embodying conflicts and oppressive situations as well as employing this powerful model of critical performative early childhood teacher education have the potential to allow early childhood educators to work out oppressive conflicts both on a personal and societal level. We have learned that these techniques are applicable to preservice and in-service teacher education classes at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Ways of bringing such an approach to the classroom involve willingness from the teacher educator to relinquish control and of teachers to start acting on oppressive situations that they experience day in and day out. Situations for which there are no immediate answers are ideal for exploration with this critical performative approach to teacher education. In light of legislations such
as *No Child Left Behind* and ever rising diversities in early education, opportunities to embrace conflict and oppressive situations are virtually endless.

**References**


