

The background of the cover is a textured, painterly illustration. On the left, a red lighthouse with a white lantern room sits on a green hill. In the foreground, a black and white penguin with a red beak stands on a sandy patch. In the sky, a purple and blue bird is in flight. The overall style is expressive and artistic.

Making School with Children

Engaging Learners to Think Critically

**Carolyn Clarke
Vivian Maria Vasquez**

Making School with Children

Praise for Making School with Children: Engaging Learners to Think Critically

Manuscripts written by practitioners and academics are exceptionally rare, especially one where the practitioner researcher was the school leader who then involved her staff and students. The combination of practices, wisdom, theory, and school-based inquiry over time is a real plus of this book.

—*Dr. Barbara Comber, Emeritus Professor, Education Futures,
University of South Australia*

In a time period where schools, teachers and children are being told what they cannot do, cannot read and cannot say, *Making School with Children* is a joyful and hopeful example of a whole school learning about the world and each other together. It is a much-needed accessible 'demonstration of practice' of how critical literacy is civic engagement. This book is a powerful example of what is possible when children's interests drive curriculum making and invites us with generous lists of resources to work in similar ways.

—*Dr. Kerry Dixon, Associate Professor,
University of Nottingham*

This is an important lens on contemporary teaching, particularly given that curricula have become narrower in scope and more prescriptive in the ways learning is taken up with students. The examples are lived, providing teachers and school leaders with insights into the ways complex ideas, such as critical literacy and civic-minded teaching, can look in classrooms with elementary-aged students.

—*Dr. Allison Tucker, Assistant Professor, Saint Francis Xavier
University, Canada*

Making School with Children

Engaging Learners to Think Critically

By

Carolyn Clarke

St Francis Xavier University, Canada

And

Vivian Maria Vasquez

American University, USA



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

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In memory of my dad, Roy Jenkins, I wish you had been here for the journey.

CC

For Andy and TJ. You are my Rock.

VV

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BOOK COVER ART

We are thrilled and grateful for the beautiful artwork that appears on the front and back cover of this book, which were specifically created for us by Jerome C. Harste. The images of Newfoundlandia that make up the artwork is symbolic of the place in which Oceanside Academy's K-6 community engaged in civic minded work. Thank you, Jerry!

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Carolyn Clarke is an Assistant Professor of Education at St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada. She has also worked 19 years as a part-time instructor for Mount Saint Vincent University in their Faculty of Education. She earned a BEd from Memorial University of Newfoundland, a MEd and MAEd from Mount Saint Vincent University, and a PhD in Literacy Education at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. Throughout a career that spans over 30 years, Carolyn has held various positions within the Newfoundland and Labrador School District from Student Assistant to Director of Schools. She has been a Program Specialist for Literacy and for Primary/Elementary education, a vice-principal, and a principal. Her research interests include critical literacy, social justice, homework, the work of female caregivers in supporting their children's education, using children's literature to teach in high school classes, and students' voices in schools. Her publications include numerous articles in refereed journals such as the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *The Reading Teacher*, *In Education*, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice Journal*, *Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, and *Language Arts*. She has presented at numerous provincial, national, and international conferences.

Vivian Maria Vasquez is a Distinguished Professor of Education at American University. She completed her doctorate at Indiana University, Bloomington, and her master's at Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada. She has worked in the field of education for over 40 years. Her research interests are in critical literacy, early literacy, and information communication technology. She has published 16 books including the award-winning *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*, *Getting Beyond I Like the Book: Creating Space for Critical Literacy in K-6 Classrooms*, *Critical Literacy Across the K-6 Curriculum*, and *Critical Comprehension*. She has numerous book chapters and articles in refereed journals including *Language Arts*, *Reading Teacher*, and the *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. Prior to working at AU, Vivian taught preschool

and public school for 14 years. She has held appointed and elected positions with organizations like The National Council of Teachers of English, The American Educational Research Association, The International Reading Association, and The Center for the Expansion of Language and Thinking. Awards received include the NCTE Outstanding Educator in the English Language Arts Award, the NCTE Advancement of People of Color Award, the AERA Division B Outstanding Book of the Year Award, and The James N. Britton Award. The NCTE Early Childhood Assembly honored Vivian with a scholarship in her name.

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CC

xx *Acknowledgments*

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Andy and TJ thank you for always helping me keep life in perspective. Being with you reminds me to center the people and places that matter most.

INTRODUCTION: “WE’LL FIGURE IT OUT.” (COME FROM AWAY, 2013)

What happens when a school principal and all the teachers in a school decide to focus on building curriculum from a critical literacy perspective using the inquiry questions, passions, and interests of children? This is a question that we, Carolyn and Vivian sought to explore at Oceanside Academy (pseudonym) where Carolyn was the school principal. This book, *Making School with Children*, represents the culmination of that work; the ways that teachers figured out how to center their teaching on topics that mattered to children, the ways that Carolyn supported the teachers to center the children’s passions, and the ways that the children figured out how to engage with those topics of importance to them. As it turned out the children’s interests were civic-minded, and they pursued topics that focused on “meaningful civically and empathy-oriented” work (Osorio et al., 2024, p. 384). This was particularly exciting since curricular space for civic education in elementary classrooms has narrowed considerably in favor of an increase in scripted English language arts curricula (Somerville-Braun, 2024). By creating critically civic-minded curricula the teachers at the school made space for their students to develop skills, practices, and dispositions that contributed to their understanding of what it means to be an informed and engaged citizen in their community and beyond. Somerville-Braun (2024) refers to this sort of work as “crucial to supporting young students’ development as equity-oriented civic actors” (p. 395).

It may well be that critical literacy and what constitutes the civic needs re-imagining given the extreme global challenges that we face today (Ahmed, 2016; Mirra et al., 2021). As such critical literacy is more important than

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ever. Learners need to develop critical literacies that bring about change and help them take a stand for justice for themselves, their communities and beyond. Routman (2018) urges teachers to infuse purpose and authenticity in all learning stating that, “without a passion for learning, students don’t remember much of value or consider the time spent on a topic, an assignment, or study worthwhile” (p. 81). Similarly, Opitz and Ford (2014) claim that, “motivation goes down when information is presented without meaning or purpose” (p. 9). More than 20 years ago, Short et al. (1996), stated that learning comes from exploring and being interested in the world and that active explorations bring about tensions that lead learners to ask questions about aspects of the world that puzzle them. Vasquez (2017; 2014; 1994) has contended since the 90s that children learn best when what they are learning has importance and significance in their lives and when curriculum is built from those significant passions, interests, and inquiry questions. Civic engagement that centers on matters of importance to children therefore creates space for them to systematically investigate questions or tensions about the world. This work is generative, allowing for the creation of new understandings, new questions, and issues that matter and make a difference in the lives of children and those around them.

Throughout the book you will read stories of work carried out in each of the K-6 classrooms in the school that show how students of all ages, teachers, and the school principal, worked together, sometimes across grade levels, to negotiate and build civic minded social action projects using the inquiry questions, interests, and passions of the children from a critical literacy perspective. Comber (2016) reminds us that children should be doing this kind of work, and that young people can and should learn to work for justice from the outset of schooling, beginning by considering the everyday of the classroom and the playground, the school and the neighborhood. This book is a school-wide response to Comber’s reminder, where teachers teach by making school with children, with the sustained support of the school principal.

Critical Literacy Then and Now

One of our reasons for writing this book is to make visible what critical literacies might be like when done as a whole school with the principal or a school administrator being part of the process of teaching and learning. Because these are instances of critical literacy that are not commonly written about. There are, however, growing accounts of critical literacies done by students and teachers in various settings such as diverse early childhood settings (Vasquez, 2014, 2017), settings with students who have been marginalized or disenfranchised (Janks, 2009; Comber, 2001, 2016), high school settings (Alford, 2021; Morrell, 2015) and even tertiary settings (Vasquez et al., 2014).

Early work in critical literacy fostered questioning texts and the world, encouraging students to concern themselves with whose interests were being served by various texts in a variety of contexts (Comber, 2001; O'Brien, 2001). This led to questioning and interrogating what was happening in various texts with a focus on how words and images were being used to convey specific types of messages that supported certain discourses or ways of doing, being, and becoming that privileged some, while putting others at a disadvantage (Vasquez, 2014; Janks, 2009). Earlier work in critical literacy also had to do with understanding who benefitted from dominant discourses and how they worked throughout the day. This included finding ways to make powerful discursive practices accessible to all learners. This meant working with learners of all ages to understand how to use words and images to do important life work. These understandings are more important now than ever before because of the rapidly increasing rate of text production that surrounds us in a limitless array of modes, media, online platforms, and other language and communication tools. Through her work on catastrophic times, Stengers (2015) warns that we (the planet) need to shift the ways we think about living and live in ways to prevent the destruction of what human life needs to survive. The question for us, as teachers, is what this might look like in the classroom. Civic engagement in projects with real world effects could be the source of curriculum for such classrooms (Comber, 2016).

While working from a critical literacy perspective, Vasquez et al. (2019) remind us that framing teaching from a critical literacy perspective "does not necessarily involve taking a negative stance; rather, it means looking at an issue or topic in different ways, analyzing it, and suggesting possibilities for change and improvement" (p. 300). Examples they share include children investigating their local wetlands and how to enhance the quality of the water or studying how cartoons work to portray those in power and those on the margins, and then creating their own. Vasquez et al. (2019) state, "how teachers negotiate critical literacy practices depends very much on the affordances of their place and the students in the room. As such, critical literacies can be pleasurable and transformational as well as pedagogical and transgressive" (p. 300).

The Setting: A Town on an Island

Oceanside Academy is a school, in a town, on an island, in Canada. The island is located between Europe and the United States where Carolyn Clarke, the school principal, and the K-6 teachers in the school created opportunities for children to carry out various civic engagement projects based on their interests, inquiry questions and passions. Many of you who read this book will have some tacit familiarity with where the stories unfold; in a place affectionately known as the Rock.

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On September 11, 2011, 38 flights with approximately 7,000 passengers, the “come from aways”, a name given by Newfoundlanders to people who are not originally from the island, landed on the Rock. Without hesitation, people from small island communities, who rarely interacted with individuals different from themselves, welcomed the world. School classrooms were quickly turned into make-shift sleeping quarters, cafeterias, chapels, mosques, play spaces, and whatever other accommodations were needed by the unexpected visitors. The island quickly transformed into a welcoming space and the Newfoundlanders’ demonstrations of kindness were witnessed and acknowledged, around the world.

We couldn’t control what happened,
but we could control what we did about it (Come from Away, 2013).

These words sung in the musical *Come from Away* could not be truer. Since that tragic time in history, children in Newfoundland and Labrador have been born into a world where the civic engagement demonstrated by their older siblings, parents, grandparents, and other relatives and friends, has had trickling effects that continue to be felt today. Life will never be what life was before the planes landed and the “come from aways” were welcomed to the Rock.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) remind us that teaching is embedded in the relationships of students and teachers and their experiences and biographies. These biographies are not just passed on through language and print. They are lived and woven into the children’s everyday world, from the moment they were born. In some ways these experiences and biographies of those who came before them become their “nonconscious experiences” (Massumi, 2002, p. 23) that contribute to how they make sense of the world. It is no surprise that the young learners that you will meet in this book display passion about “their” place and space and want to learn more and do more for an area that means so much to them. The children know they have a choice in how to participate in the world around them. In this book, we share with you their choices for engaging in civic work from a critical literacy perspective by doing projects that contribute in some way to making the world a better place in a variety of ways as their family members did almost 25 years ago.

Welcome to the Rock

On the edge of the world where the river meets the sea
here on the edge of the Atlantic
on an island in between there and here.
Welcome to the Rock (Come from Away, 2013)!

Stengers (2015) insists that we need to engage in work that "try to make the possibility of a future that isn't barbaric, now" (p. 23). If we focus our civics work from Gander's response to 9/11, and its trickling effect on the people of Newfoundland and Labrador, we can imagine the possibility of a future that isn't barbaric. Instead, we can imagine a future of possibilities, one where people come together to support one another and contribute to making their world a better place for themselves and for others. This is not to say that Newfoundland and Labrador is an idyllic Shangri-La without its share of social issues and problems. A place like that probably does not exist in the world but it should not stop us from doing what we can to live for the better. After all, "we're all in this together" (Come from Away, 2013).

"It's amazing what can happen when people come together" (Come from Away, 2013)

Kelly et al. (2023) state that "*who* we are affects *how* we create inclusive spaces where all children thrive," and so "it's important to recognize how our identities as literacy educators are shaped by our histories" (p. 1).

Carolyn

Carolyn was born in Newfoundland and lived most of her life on the Rock. She travelled regularly outside Newfoundland from early childhood and experienced different cultures through her travels. Carolyn acknowledges that Newfoundland is isolated, cut off from mainland Canada, and lacked the ethnic diversity of people and culture experienced by other provinces like British Columbia and Ontario. In recent years, however, Newfoundland and Labrador have been marketed as a popular and exciting tourist destination. After 9/11 many of the previously stranded passengers from around the globe returned to the Rock with their families, bringing with them a diversity of people. Newfoundland has also welcomed Syrian and Ukrainian families, albeit under difficult circumstances, further expanding the diversity found in communities. These situations allowed children to meet and see people different from themselves. Furthermore, while Newfoundland may not have had a diversity of population, diversity existed in other ways. For instance, diverse socioeconomic conditions are widespread in every community and can have a significant impact on life in communities and in schools. Such was the case at Oceanside Academy.

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As a teacher and administrator, Carolyn saw first-hand the challenges some families faced in their attempts to “keep-up” with others and ensure their children had what they needed to succeed. When families have limited access to educational resources and struggle to provide adequate nutrition, children’s academic performance and well-being can be impacted. Children from higher income families have greater opportunity to be involved in extra-curricular activities and, academically, have families who advocate on their behalf and are able to avail of outside support, such as costly tutoring. The socioeconomic diversity of families is one area teachers and school staff need to be cognizant of and requires a cultural competence to understand the unique needs of children from all backgrounds. Such awareness creates a supportive and inclusive environment for all children, regardless of socioeconomic status.

As a student, particularly in elementary school, Carolyn remembers her class being divided into three groups for reading instruction. Each group was labelled; A—for the smartest readers, B—for the “so-so” readers, and C—for the slowest readers or as least that was the perception of her seven- and eight-year-old self. Even then, as a child, the inequity of this did not sit right with Carolyn. She always wondered about the stories in the other readers—the ones she was not allowed to read. The illustrations looked more beautiful and enticing in the prohibited book. Carolyn took this experience to her teaching, firmly believing there must be a better way.

Even as a beginning teacher, Carolyn was aware of the importance of critical literacy and equity for all children. Reading the works of such scholars as Vivian Vasquez, Allan Luke, Barbara Comber, and Hilary Janks positioned her to think about critical literacy through a broad lens. Carolyn realized that critical literacy could happen and needs to happen everywhere and with everyone. No matter the space and place, wherever learners co-exist, there is a need to examine, think about, and rethink concepts of fairness, justice, and equity. The fact that Newfoundland is isolated and not widely diverse makes exposure to a variety of texts and resources even more important for children on the island. Previous experiences and reflections helped shape who Carolyn wanted to be as an educator. She believed that, working alongside teachers and together with students, curriculum could be built using the interests of children and they can all work from a critical literacy perspective. This guided Carolyn, as a school principal, to work directly in classrooms with teachers and children to actively promote creating an equitable learning environment where children have agency and voice.

In recent years, Carolyn became involved with Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library (DPIL) as a way to promote early literacy. The program is dedicated to improving the lives of children by inspiring a love of reading, with books delivered directly to homes, free to all families, on a monthly basis, from birth to five years of age. DPIL offers children a head-start in life as

literacy development is crucial in the early years. The program is aligned with Carolyn's belief in equity in education and the importance of early literacy learning.



Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL)

According to their website the DPIL is dedicated to inspiring a love of reading by gifting books free of charge to children from birth to age five, through funding shared by Dolly Parton and local community partners in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and Republic of Ireland. To date DPIL has had almost three million children registered for the program and more than 290 million books have been gifted.

Vivian

Vivian was born in the Philippines and immigrated to Canada with her family soon after her 10th birthday. While in Manila she attended what was referred to as an American School. Such schools were common at the time because for almost 50 years the United States governed the Philippines as a colonial power (Casambre, 1982). As colonizers the US government pursued policies that were claimed to promote the well-being of the people of the Philippines. Such policies included the imposition of an American system of education and English as the language of instruction. When she was born, immigrating abroad was not something her parents imagined and so they spoke to her in English from the start, believing that since she would grow up in the Philippines, she could easily learn Tagalog. Even though the Philippines restored its independence in July 1946, elements from the American colonization of the Philippines in the past continued to be entangled in the lives of Filipinx children for many years with remnants that continue to be felt today. As such, English was part of Vivian's life from the start and books like *Dick and Jane* and American life became a central part of a curriculum that resulted in what Campano et al. (2016) describe as the formation of Vivian as a racialized other, in the very country in which she was born. As such, at school she was forced to engage with texts that included characters with whom she could not identify. This experience of not being able to see herself or her passions and interests in the books and texts she engaged with in school continued after her family immigrated to North America. Throughout her life there have been numerous times when assumptions about what it means to be an immigrant have resulted in traumatizing instances of racism and being made to feel like an outsider, as a child in Canada and then as an adult in the United States.

When she was in elementary school, as an immigrant child, multicultural education, which can be traced historically to the Civil Rights Movement, was only beginning to take root. As such there continued to be a disconnect between the texts used by her teachers in the classroom and her lived

experiences. Imagine what a difference it could have made for Vivian and her classmates to engage with books that were culturally sustaining, in which she could see herself, in which others could see her. As a classroom teacher, these experiences from her past helped shape who she wanted to be as a classroom teacher and how she wanted to teach. As a classroom teacher, Vivian worked hard to build curriculum using the interests of children and then eventually to do so from a critical literacy perspective beginning in the '90s (Vasquez, 1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2014). Since those earlier teaching days and in the company of mentors and friends such as Barbara Comber, Jerry Harste, Hilary Janks, Alan Luke, Andy Manning, Sonia Nieto, Naomi Silverman, and so many others, she has sustained her passion for creating critical literacies from pre-K to tertiary settings for over 30 years.

Coming Together From Similar Yet Separate Paths

Carolyn and Vivian have spent years dedicated to working with children, and preservice and in-service teachers. Their similar, yet separate, paths led them to this work. Their past experiences as children in the school system helped shaped who they are as individuals, teachers, and caring humans. It was their earliest experiences and the recognition of inequities that significantly influenced who they are as educators. Carolyn and Vivian's combined journeys, mutual influencers, similar beliefs in children, and advocacy of critical literacy are reflected in the stories within the pages of this book.

Arriving at Making School With Children

Writing this book is the result of conversations between the two of us, Carolyn and Vivian, after Carolyn shared some of the critical literacy work she had been doing with teachers at the school where she was a principal. During one of these conversations Vivian remarked that what Carolyn was doing was such a powerful way of making school with children and that she should write about that. It was not until a few years later when Carolyn reminded Vivian of that conversation that the topic of making school with children came back into focus.

It was in the midst of the COVID pandemic that we began with a discussion about how it could look in practice, for an entire K-6 school to focus on using critical literacy in the everyday. With Carolyn living in Newfoundland and Vivian living in the Washington DC area, we took advantage of what technology we had at our disposal and began a sustained conversation using a cloud-based video conferencing platform. We began with an assumption that a whole school critical literacy effort was possible, and