

Critical Literacy in Action: Difference as a Force for Positive Change

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I write during the September 20–27, 2019, Global Climate Strike, led by Greta Thunberg, self-described on her Facebook page as a “16 year old climate and environmental activist with Asperger’s.” As a critical literacy educator, I am interested in the intersection of Thunberg’s neurotypical diversity with relations of power between young people and adults; the access that English, together with traditional and social media, has given her to a global audience; and her commitment to social action to effect a radical redesign of social norms and practices. I have long argued that critical literacy relies on the interdependence of power, diversity, access, and design/redesign, and I see these at work in Thunberg’s activism to halt climate change.

In focusing on Thunberg as a case study, I do not intend to minimize the importance of other youth activists. Thunberg said that she was inspired by the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School who launched a national movement to change gun control laws in the United States after seeing a former student gun down their friends at their school. Elsewhere (Janks, 2019), I discussed how the impact of their school’s commitment to debating, drama, journalism, and meaningful civics education, together with its Advanced Placement Government class, had prepared these students for critical active citizenship and political action. The nationwide demonstration March for Our Lives, which these students organized, involved millions of people in marches in Washington, DC, and 800 other sites around the country and the world on March 24, 2018. The students’ #NeverAgain campaign effected changes to gun legislation in Florida, brought pressure to bear on U.S. congressmen opposed to gun legislation, led some corporations to revoke their National Rifle Association sponsorships, and encouraged youth to vote in the 2018 elections.

Thunberg does not attribute her activism to her education but to her having Asperger’s syndrome—to her being different. “Asperger’s quickly became synonymous with a kind of high-functioning autism in which children struggled with social skills, anxiety,

and repetitive or restrictive behaviors but also tended to display impressive cognitive and verbal abilities” (Crayola Beauty Lips, 2014, para. 1). In 2013, it was folded into the autism spectrum disorder, whose “criteria include impaired social communication or social reciprocity...[and] peculiar behaviors or interests” (Parry, 2013, paras. 5–6). Despite the change in terminology in the United States, I continue to use *Asperger’s* here, to respect Thunberg’s identification with this term.

Rose (1989) provided extensive evidence for the ways in which the social and psychological sciences have been responsible for the construction of normativity. Psychometric testing, for example, led to the quantification of intelligence, literacy, and numeracy that have been used to construct the norms against which individuals are measured. The discourse of child development, together with standardized testing, continues to subject children to a gaze that measures and inscribes difference and creates “a hierarchy of the normal” (p. 139).

Thunberg (2019c) tweeted, “I have Asperger’s and that means I’m sometimes a bit different from the norm....And — given the right circumstances — being different is a superpower” (para. 2). In a *CBS This Morning* interview, she also said, “I don’t really care about social codes” (“Teen Activist Greta Thunberg,” 2019, para. 7). Like others on the autism spectrum, she is direct and honest and speaks her mind (Attwood, as cited by Rozsa, 2019), with fewer inhibitions than neurotypicals:

Our leadership has failed us. Young people must hold older generations accountable for the mess they have created. (Thunberg, as cited in Ocasio-Cortez, 2018, paras. 1–2)

You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes. (Sutter & Davidson, 2018, para. 25)

Speaking as a young person who will inherit a decimated planet, her calls to action to arrest climate change have particular force. Her *Skolstrejk för Klimatet* (School Strike for the Climate) is symbolically powerful because, as she said,

Why should I be studying for a future that soon will be no more when no one is doing anything whatsoever to save that future? And what is the point of learning facts in the school system when the most important facts given by the finest science of that same school system clearly means nothing to our politicians and our society? (Thunberg, 2018)

It is her youth—expressed in her words, her voice, her body—that makes the message, that it is children who will pay the price for what adults have done to the planet, so powerful.

Her youth has been the focus of some of the attacks against her. Critics accuse her of being manipulated by “green business” (according to right-wing members of the French Parliament; “French MPs Urge Boycott,” 2019, para. 6), by “pushy celebrity parents” (Harvey, 2019, para. 9), or by “mental abuse by manipulative adults” (according to British climate denier Piers Corbyn; Speare-Cole, 2019, para. 3). The critics do not believe that adults should be schooled or scolded by children, and fail to understand that young people can think and speak for themselves. Thunberg wonders why her critics seem more scared of her than of climate change.

Thunberg understands that climate activism requires changes in the way we live. To reduce her own carbon footprint, she became a vegan and gave up traveling by airplane. She has also stopped consuming and buying new things. Embodying her beliefs and values in her words and practices, she demonstrates a different way of being in relation to the planet.

Coming from Sweden, a small country that nevertheless has a high per capita carbon footprint, her lone school strike began outside the Swedish Parliament House. She said, “Many people say that Sweden is just a small country and it doesn’t matter what we do. But I’ve learned you are never too small to make a difference” (Mesey, 2018, para. 6). Small in size and young in years, Thunberg’s success in mobilizing youth around the world is proof of this claim. It was her success in persuading her own parents to change to a more planet-conserving lifestyle that led her to believe that her actions could make a difference.

Although not all people with Asperger’s syndrome are the same, the tendency to focus on and develop an in-depth knowledge of a special interest with a passionate intensity is common. According to Rozsa (2019), people identified as having “Asperger’s are often known for their ability to absorb vast quantities of information on specialized subjects and use it constructively” (para. 15). Thunberg’s knowledge of climate science is impressive; as she claimed, “she has done her homework” (“Greta Thunberg Has Done Her Science Homework,” 2019,

para. 5). She epitomizes what it means to read the word and the world critically.

“Her family see her Asperger’s as a blessing. She is someone who strips away social distractions and focuses with black-and-white clarity on the issues” (Watts, 2019, para. 22). This has enabled her to see climate change as an existential crisis:

Solving the climate crisis is the greatest and most complex challenge that Homo sapiens have ever faced. The main solution, however, is so simple that even a small child can understand it. We have to stop our emissions of greenhouse gases.

Either we do that or we don’t.

You say nothing in life is black or white. But that is a lie. A very dangerous lie. Either we prevent 1.5C of warming or we don’t. Either we avoid setting off that irreversible chain reaction beyond human control or we don’t.

Either we choose to go on as a civilisation or we don’t. That is as black or white as it gets. There are no grey areas when it comes to survival. (Thunberg, 2019a, paras. 8–11)

Thunberg’s straight talk has attracted approximately 3 million followers on Twitter, approximately 2.7 million on Facebook, and approximately 8.2 million on Instagram. Her ability to cut to the chase and speak in language that others can understand makes her a powerful communicator. Her ability to coin a memorable, inspirational, or sharply critical comment in English, her second language, and her effective use of social media have enabled her to reach a wide audience and inspire a global mass movement. In September 2019, an estimated 4 million people around the world joined the Global Strike for the Climate (Sengupta, 2019).

For Greta Thunberg, if you understand how climate change is affecting the planet, then action is an imperative. This, too, she attributes to Asperger’s:

We [people on the autism spectrum]...don’t have the distance from what we know and what we say and how we act. But to normal people, they have cognitive dissonance. I can’t understand how someone can say, ‘Yeah, climate change is very important,’ and not do something about it. If you know it, then you also know you have to do something. (McCarthy, 2019, para. 16)

As an 8-year-old, when “our teachers showed us films of plastic in the ocean, starving polar bears and so on” (Watts, 2019, para. 7), Thunberg was shocked that nobody was doing anything about it. She “cried through all the movies” (para. 7) and could not stop thinking about them, as her classmates could. At age 11, she became extremely depressed. She stopped eating, stopped talking, and stopped going to school. Echoes of her anxiety and fears can be seen in her January 2019 speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland:

Adults keep saying: “We owe it to the young people to give them hope.” But I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act.

I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is. (Thunberg, 2019a, paras. 20–21)

She wants other young people to get angry and to transform that anger into action.

Although taking action helped Thunberg recover from her debilitating depression, she has not enjoyed being the center of attention. Her Asperger’s label meant she was accustomed to being “the invisible girl at the back that no one sees or listens to” (Hook, 2019, para. 35). She has written on Twitter that before becoming an activist, she had no energy and no friends and did not speak to anyone. She just sat alone at home with an eating disorder. The characteristics that led to her Asperger’s diagnosis have made her the target of right-wing abuse. According to an opinion piece in *The Guardian*, Thunberg has been described as “‘deeply disturbed’, ‘freakishly influential’ and ‘strange’....there was ‘something chilling’ about Thunberg, who ‘increasingly looks and sounds like a cult member’” (Baggini, 2019, para. 1).

This is a classic example of constructing people who are different as Other and dangerous. In *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication*, Thompson (1990) described unification and fragmentation as two modes of operation of ideology. Fragmentation is the process of splitting people who are different off from *us*, where the collective identity of *us* is itself an ideological construction created by the process of unification. Othering treats those who are different as a threat, warranting vilification, expulsion, and even mass elimination. This is not an exaggeration; genocide is the extreme outcome of dehumanization. This is why I have argued that the issue of diversity needs to be a central pillar in critical literacy education.

Asperger’s syndrome takes its name from Johann Friedrich Karl Asperger, the Austrian pediatrician who first described the pattern of behavior associated with the syndrome. He described mentally abnormal children as “‘autistic psychopaths’—because the confinement of the self (*autos*) has led to a narrowing of relations to their environment” (Asperger, as cited in Sheffer, 2018, p. 82). In her book *Asperger’s Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna*, Sheffer (2018) showed that in his support of the Nazi quest for racial purity, Asperger took part in the Third Reich’s sterilization and systematic killing of children diagnosed as physically or

mentally defective. This is reason enough to discontinue the use of his name for people who are neurodiverse.

Hatred toward children who are neurotypically diverse is not new. Thunberg’s (2019c) response to the vilification she received from adult men shows her inner strength: “When haters go after your looks and differences, it means they have nowhere left to go. And then you know you’re winning!” (para. 1).

For Thunberg, what matters is the message, not the messenger. In addressing the U.S. Congress on September 18, 2019, she said, “I don’t want you to listen to me. I want you to listen to the scientists....I want you to unite behind the science. And then I want you to take action” (Volcovici, 2019, paras. 1 and 3). To this end, she submitted to Congress the special report on global warming produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2019) of the United Nations. Having read the report herself, she knows that it provides the scientific evidence that supports her cause, and it is her hope that scientists can override the influence of the fossil fuel industry on governments.

Thunberg (2019b) also understands that “those who will be affected the hardest [by climate change] are already suffering the consequences. But their voices are not heard” (para. 8). This draws attention to the 2 million people a week who require humanitarian aid as a result of climate change. She reminds us that society’s poor and vulnerable are less able to shield themselves from the consequences of climate change than the rich and powerful. She recognizes that radical action is needed to avoid a climate catastrophe.

Young people are already breaking the rules by staying out of school, and they want world leaders to do whatever is necessary to save the planet. As educators, we have a responsibility to bring their ideas into the classroom so our students are able to read climate change critically and engage with the crisis that affects their futures. Thunberg does not want our praise; she wants us to act. It is not enough to read the wor(l)d critically if that does not lead to transformative social change.

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