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Karen S. Vocke

*Western Michigan University*

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## CRITICAL LITERACY IN TWO WORLDS

KAREN S. VOCKE  
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Integrating notions of critical literacy and critical pedagogy is a key to English education classes I teach. While the precise definition of these terms is subject to much theoretical debate, without a foundation of critical pedagogy, teachers cannot instill a critical literacy perspective in students that is vital to a well-rounded education process.

My research and teaching experiences have afforded me the opportunity to participate in several classroom settings where critical pedagogy and critical literacy were educational priorities. Two particular classrooms, one in Michigan and the other in Cuba, will be examined in this article. Even though these two educational settings are vastly different, the two teachers are in many ways similar. My focus here is to examine how these two teachers use critical pedagogy to enhance the educational process in their own classrooms.

Researchers have provided various perspectives on critical pedagogy. In my own literacy and education courses, I introduce my students to Peter McLaren's (2000) definition: "dialectical and dialogical process that instantiates a reciprocal exchange between teachers and students" addresses the power relations of knowledge "reframing, refunctioning, and reposing the question of understanding itself" (p. 185).

In this case, the teacher and learner create new perspectives on knowledge in a mutual exchange of ideas, an ongoing dialogue with students in which both teacher and student learn to question and challenge the status quo of knowledge. Students are encouraged to use inquiry-based learning and seek understanding about their world. Social issues and social justice undergird much of the curriculum. The resulting community of learners facilitates literacy.

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) synthesize definitions that discussed in both theoretical and practice-oriented literature over the last 30 years. They identified "four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 382).

Understanding critical literacy is best done by observing how these theoretical notions emerge in practice. Teachers who believe in inquiry and social action can provide models for how notions of critical literacy plays out in classrooms. Critical approaches are evident in elementary classrooms of which I have been a part. One classroom is right here in Michigan, and the other is a seeming world away—Havana, Cuba. Both classrooms are set in urban areas, and the teachers are Jennifer, a third grade instructor from a mid-sized city in western Michigan and Nicola, an elementary instructor from Havana, Cuba. Both have taken a critical approach to education. I have been privileged to spend considerable time with both teachers and have found both possess a strong commitment to teaching and learning. Unfortunately, these teachers likely will not meet each other or share ideas because of the political tension and resulting travel difficulties between the two countries.

Jennifer is able to provide a challenging, social justice-oriented perspective in her class. University students work intensively with her third graders, who are accustomed to diverse viewpoints. Nichola, whose class I visited over the past three years, demonstrates critical perspectives in much subtler ways, exposing her students to my views as an American, using a variety of children's literature to supplement the established Cuban educational curriculum, and urging her students to contribute to the social order. While Nichola's efforts would be commonplace in the United States, her willingness to push the perceived Cuban classroom educational boundaries parallels Jennifer's more radical approach to introduce critical literacy to the students. In the narrative that follows the classroom settings, and education boundaries of both teachers will be

examined in the context of actual classroom interaction where each—in her own way—exemplifies critical pedagogy and fosters critical literacy.

### **A Glimpse at Jennifer's Classroom**

Jennifer's class is located in a large, old school building in a medium-sized western Michigan city. A large percentage of the school's children qualify for free breakfast and lunch. The school curriculum is innovative and focuses on theory to practice of language arts. Hallway walls on all three floors of the school are saturated with student writing and artwork. Jennifer's class is on the second floor, near the end of the high-ceilinged hall; it's a lively, cluttered, welcoming place. At the far end of the classroom, three computers are available for students to use. A large rug designed with colored blocks borders the rest of the wall. Books abound on various shelves around the room, and children move about freely to complete their tasks. On this day, Jennifer's classroom projects the usual energy level of third graders. The current days' project focuses on research. Lesha is fascinated by the topic of marine biology after reading a book on dolphins and soon is on her way to the library to find other resources on the topic. Jennifer helps the child compose an email to a marine biologist friend who lives in California. Several students also trek to the library and later return with books on their topics.

The apparently chaotic nature of the classroom offers the children freedom to inquire. Tables grouping students in fours facilitates collaboration. At times students chose to work in various sites around the room. Books abound and children are engaged in various writing projects. Collaboration is evident and children readily share their work with each other and the teacher. Jennifer's teaching style is reflected in other topics such as the Civil Rights movement and the contributions of great African Americans. She uses the subject matter to emphasize respect and responsibility in her classroom community.

In conversations and classroom visits with Jennifer this year, I have witnessed her ongoing

commitment to providing her students with opportunities to express their own perspectives on the world. Many of the students have nontraditional family structures, and Jennifer validates them all, from Janie's living with a single mom to Jasmine's placement with her grandparents. One student, Jack, has written extensive poetry and books about his family, life, and views of the world. Students write about their real lives, and Jennifer consistently provides opportunities for the children to read, write, speak, and listen about the reality of inner city life.

In Jennifer's classroom, there is a focus on social issues, and students are involved in the processes of social justice. The students in her class are ethnically diverse—African American, Hispanic, and white. Jennifer uses literature reflecting the heritages of her students to challenge mainstream assumptions about historical and current events. She emphasizes communication and citizenship. Negotiation and conflict resolution are key discussion tools in her class and children learn to resolve their differences and respect each other. Jennifer's goal is to teach them that this is a key way of interaction and negotiation in the larger world.

One scenario I witnessed last spring, as two of my university students were working with third graders Sean and Dimitra, Dimitra began to dominate the session, wanting to share only her work. Tears rolled down Sean's cheeks until Jennifer pulled both children aside. Gently admonishing Dimitra, she asked the child if she had considered whether Sean had had the opportunity to contribute. Jennifer asked Sean if he had expressed his concern to Dimitra. At their teacher's suggestion, each child made a simple statement about his/her feelings. Jennifer then reiterated what each had said, asking if this had resolved the problem. She then asked if they remembered that communication like this could be a way of solving conflict with people in general. The children agreed and happily resumed their project.

### **A Glimpse at Nichola's Havana Classroom**

Nichola's room is not fancy by any stretch of the imagination. There are the requisite desks for the

students, her desk in the front of the room, and a larger one for the volunteer who came in to help students catch up. The walls are in need of paint (a scarcity in Cuba) and the windows were wide open. On the walls are minimal hangings, although a commonplace portrait of national hero Camilo Cienfuegos is displayed prominently. The ceiling needs some work, but it keeps the rain out—most days. Until repairs are made, Nicola shares a classroom in the school’s theatre building with Laura, another second grade teacher also responsible for 20 students. Their individual charges are seated in designated areas of the class, but the two teachers have developed a system of team teaching all subjects.

Their curriculum is the same as other schools across the country, and is adapted yearly by the Ministry of Education with feedback from educators at all levels. Outside visitors, especially Americans, to schools are few, and must receive official permission. Ideology and nationalism shape much of curricular content. Having the authorization to be in this classroom was an honor and privilege for me. Because I speak Spanish, I was able to communicate effectively with students, teachers, and parents.

I had the opportunity to watch Nicola conduct a math class. Using cardboard manipulatives, she led a lesson on place value. Following this lesson, students got out their notebooks and wrote numbers that she dictated. Following that, students wrote down subtraction and addition problems that she dictated and solved them. Nicola provided several examples first on the board and then informed students that they needed to listen very carefully. She then devoted time to student responses, making sure that each child understood the concepts at hand.

On another day, I observed a similar class session and attended an end of the term party organized by parents. Nicola participates in a process known in Spanish as *ciclaje*, which in the U.S. educational system might be referred to as looping, a process during which the same teacher stays with the same children in grades one through four. She is in her second year but with only a

portion of her children from last year, because last year her class size was more than 35 students. This year, the Ministry of Education mandated that teachers have only 20 pupils in their classes to assure better learning.

Nichola, too, challenges the commonplace. A highly rigid, state-controlled curriculum is the reality in the Cuban educational system, but Nichola finds opportunities for her students to learn beyond the mandated textbooks. Unlike in the United States, children’s books are a limited resource and few teachers have access to the latest publications. Nichola has been lucky to have access to books published outside Cuba, and she frequently uses this supplemental literature to expose her students to more global viewpoints. Last year she obtained a VCR in her classroom and makes use of available films and documentaries. While these tasks may seem commonplace to teachers in the United States, they demonstrate a young Cuban teacher’s commitment to providing her students with one opportunity to think and look outside the box of the controlled curriculum.

In Nichola’s class, social issues are embedded in the school curriculum. Social equality gained by the Revolution is a pervasive theme of textbooks, as are the accomplishments of national hero Jose Martí. Much of the emphasis in the socialist educational system is on an individual’s responsibility to contribute to a better society. Children learn from an early age about their social responsibility and during their school career perform various community projects from work with the elderly to agricultural labor. Third graders, for example, might help to plant a community garden. While Nichola must teach the curriculum required in her Cuban school, she has instilled in her students an ability to reflect on their social responsibility. A strong notion of community is fostered in her classroom.

Nichola possesses an approach similar to Jennifer’s in working with her young charges. Children in her classroom often approach her voluntarily when there is a conflict, and she will ask leading questions in an attempt to facilitate

resolution. One example that stands out in my mind occurred on the playground when two students challenged each other for the opportunity to be “it” in a game of hiding a handkerchief when only a few minutes of playtime remained. Nichola’s solution was to assume the role of “it” herself, because, as she explained to her students, “You know, I think I would like to have a turn at the game. That way, you will both have the chance to play with me.”

### Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints

The issue of actually having access to multiple perspectives is a key factor here; Jennifer has significant liberty to broaden her curriculum, while Nichola must work within the criteria established by the Cuban educational ministry. Each teacher, though, has found a way to expose her students to different perspectives that ultimately result in expanded knowledge and understanding.

Jennifer’s students have a unique opportunity to learn about different viewpoints as they have had my university students as regular visitors to her class. Each semester, my pre-service literacy and language arts methods students spend the equivalent of four weeks tutoring and interacting with Jennifer’s third-graders. Jennifer and I have estimated that more than 70 university people have been involved with her class; this includes my students, me, and other visitors who have volunteered in some capacity. This has been a rare opportunity for these children and she has found this to be extremely beneficial to her students. In class discussions and projects, Jennifer’s students draw upon their knowledge of the wide variety of people with whom they have interacted. Jennifer’s favorite question is, “Now what would \_\_\_\_\_ think about that?” The responses are often amazing.

For Nichola, the opportunity to interrogate multiple perspectives is more limited. Her curriculum is set and she is obligated to follow the ideological perspectives established. However, she firmly believes that her children need to know about different views. For her, this meant my presence in her classroom for several days. A rare occurrence in Cuban schools, the opportunity to interact with a

*norteamericana* and learn about the lives and learning of children in the United States was an invaluable experience for her students. I answered questions about the United States, I helped with math problems, I did an informal question and answer session about school and life in the United States, and I interacted informally with them during my time there. Because Nichola challenged her students to learn firsthand about the U.S., she broke with the commonplace view of the Cuban educational system, a small, yet daring step in her instilling an emerging critical perspective

### **Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues: Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice**

Critical pedagogy in the classroom setting goes beyond the mechanistic process of memorizing and recall. Educational growth entails recognizing the diversity of the world. Within the constraints of their environments, both Jennifer and Nicola linked social issues with learning.

Teaching with an emphasis on social action I consider to be the key precept of critical literacy. To examine this, I combine the latter domains of critical literacy, action and promotion of social justice. Indeed, within all four domains, as Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) agree, “none stand alone” (p. 382). Hutchinson and Romano (1998) describe the process of education for social justice:

Teaching for social justice can be conceptualized in two different, but complimentary ways. One way to understand teaching for social justice is to employ a teaching strategy that fosters and gives students an opportunity to experience and gain practice...those attributes that help social justice to flourish. For example, to prepare for democratic living, students need opportunities to learn how to be tolerant, handle conflict, trust one another, and build community...A second way to view teaching for social justice is to address specific topics by having students examine their curriculum critically and uncover its intersections with social justice concern (pp. 254-255).

In both of these classrooms, I observed that teachers emphasize citizenship, social responsibility, and cooperation with the goal of providing their young charges with means to interact effectively in society. Children learn about their responsibilities within society and are exposed to situations that allow them to practice those roles. These social responsibilities involve issues of conflict resolution, communication and citizenship that extends to all other aspects of the classroom. Each teacher strives to include parents in the classroom and school community; both teachers seek to model for their students the various possibilities that exist for successful family and society.

Jennifer struggles to involve parents. She takes an active interest in students' home situations and will often call a parent or guardian when she is concerned about a child. This contact is often challenging. Many parents work and are unable to participate in a volunteer capacity during the school day. Complicating factors also include nontraditional family structures. Some of the children in Jennifer's class reside with grandparents or other extended family members, and these are the individuals with whom she most often interacts. Parents and relatives of the children are more likely to attend conferences or other general school events rather than spend time in the classroom.

Parents have a key role in the school and work consistently with teachers. Nichola has a number of parents directly involved with the day-to-day events in the classroom. On my first day visiting her class, I noticed a young boy in the back of the room working with a woman on exercises from one of his textbooks. Both were intent on their task, and during a break, I casually asked the woman about her work with the boy. She explained that he had missed school the previous day and that as a parent volunteer she was responsible for a review.

One of the best opportunities I had to observe the role of parents in her classroom was at an end of the semester party. About fifteen parents attended the event, and I had substantial opportunity to converse with them. A common ground for

conversation with the parents was to tell them about my involvement in the school and extracurricular activities of my own daughter Amanda. One of my observations was the attendance of at least three fathers. When I asked about the scheduling of work and school volunteerism, I was told by one father that his employer allows him to take extended time off during the day for such participation. Another father and mother explained to me that usually she is the one to come to school during the day. Some parents also assist with after-school sports programs. Nichola knows most of her students' parents well and often visits their homes. Like Jennifer, she is concerned about family situations that might affect the children's learning at school.

### **Conclusion**

As a participant-observer of the educational systems of Cuba and Michigan, both seem vastly different. I have witnessed extreme contrasts in classroom resources, curriculum structure, and family involvement. What I have observed, though, is that the educational process can be enhanced though the implementation of teaching with a critical perspective. Increasing children's involvement in their learning and linking the educational process to social issues extends the curriculum beyond the school session hours. Comparing and contrasting these two teachers' ability to integrate critical pedagogy and literacy, I found several overarching themes. Teachers in Cuba face the limitations of structured curriculum and lack of educational resources. Because of these barriers, they quite effectively use resources of family. Teachers are highly valued and respected for their work.

Critical pedagogy as a teaching tool should drive the curriculum in the United States as well. At the present time, Michigan school systems have the foundation and resources to support critical pedagogy as the desired teaching methodology. However the existing political climate is slowly erecting barriers:

Teachers are faced with increasing pressure and accountability for their students' academic progress.

The tightening of the educational budget is reducing school resources and increasing class size.

Standardizes testing is limiting curriculum flexibility.

Many college teacher education programs do not focus on critical literacy theory as a major aspect of teaching methodology.

Economic and other family issues continue to reduce parental involvement in daily school activities.

Only when teachers are universally supported and nurtured in their quest to provide critical literacy perspectives in their classes will their student's true potential emerge. I hope that someday Jennifer and Nichola have an opportunity to share what they have so much in common.

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