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Making Critical Literacy Accessible to Pre-Service Teachers: Why and How?

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This paper presents a practical way of teaching critical literacy to pre-service teachers through a critical literacy engagement. It begins with a literature review on critical literacy. Then, the critical literacy engagement is discussed in detail. Specifically, the critical literacy engagement is intended to help the pre-service teachers (a) understand why critical literacy is important, (b) see an example of how to put critical literacy into practice, and (c) apply what has been learned.

Introduction

I have been teaching literacy methods courses in the elementary teacher preparation program at a Midwestern university in the United States for years. The university is located in a city where there are an increasing number of immigrant students. The student population is very diverse in one of the city's P-12 school districts with which I have worked closely in placing pre-service teachers for their practicum. This school district is largely urban with a 45% Caucasian, 24% African-American, 16% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 9% multiracial student population. All schools in this district include at least four racial/ethnic groups, while most schools contain five or six. Yet most of the pre-service teachers I teach are middle-class Caucasians, who grew up and went to school with peers like themselves, and have had little experience working with students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds.

While there is little disagreement among the pre-service teachers that literacy serves as an avenue to success, they are not explicitly aware that literacy, including academic literacy, is also a product of the dominant culture and can be used to marginalize others. If the focus of their teaching in the future is only on teaching literacy skills without questioning what is embedded in the text, there is a risk of perpetuating the dominant culture and continuing to marginalize the underprivileged. Without reflecting critically on what they teach, the pre-service teachers' well-meaning intention of helping the underprivileged students can turn into the opposite. Therefore, my teaching and research are geared toward helping the pre-service teachers understand the power and politics of literacy, reflect critically on them, and implement a literacy curriculum to empower their students. This paper documents why and how I have introduced the pre-service teachers to critical literacy through a literacy engagement. It is important to note that an engagement is different from an activity in that students in an engagement take a proactive role in learning while students in an activity may be busy doing something, such as a worksheet, but do not necessarily participate actively in, or have the ownership of, learning. Therefore, the term "engagement" is used throughout this paper to emphasize that students are involved/engaged and take an active role in an inquiry in which they are interested. In what follows, the critical literacy engagement will be discussed in detail after a brief literature review of critical literacy is presented.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is a field in literacy education that is traceable genealogically to the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian literacy educator and activist. Freire along with his colleague

Macedo (1987) argues that educators should teach literacy learners to read the word and the world. Literacy training should not only focus on the learning of literacy skills, but also be considered “a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 187). Similarly, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1984) proposes that literacy education embodied in reflection and action is meant to empower the oppressed through a dialogical process. Within English-speaking countries, the publication and translation of Freire’s work to English in the 1970s, along with his collaborations with Donald Macedo and Ira Shor, “mark a watershed in the development of critical literacy as a distinct theoretical and pedagogical field” (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. vii).

Building on Freire’s work, Anderson and Irvine (1993) define critical literacy as “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (p. 82). The goal of critical literacy “is to challenge these unequal power relations” (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). In parallel, Lankshear and McLaren (1993) believe that critical literacy makes possible, among other things, “a more adequate and accurate ‘reading’ of the world, [so that] people can enter into ‘rewriting’ the world into a formation in which their interests, identities, and legitimate aspirations are more fully present and are present more equally” (p. xviii). Vasquez (2001, 2010, 2014, 2015) elevates the discussion of critical literacy to the ontological level and describes critical literacy as a way of being that should cut across the entire curriculum. Literacy education perceived from this critical slant is no longer merely the instruction of literacy skills. It is broadened to include the fostering of the ability to problematize and redefine ideologies depicted in the texts and power relations experienced in our daily lives.

To help the pre-service teachers understand why critical literacy is important and how to put it into practice, the critical literacy engagement was incorporated into the first course of a series of three literacy methods courses required for the elementary teacher preparation program in which I have taught for years. The pre-service teachers taking this course were in their junior year, and there was a thirty-hour practicum requirement attached to this course. I was responsible for teaching the course as well as supervising the practicum. The critical literacy engagement consisted of three parts. First, it helped the pre-service teachers understand why critical literacy is important. Second, it showed the pre-service teachers an example of how to put critical literacy into practice. Finally, it gave the pre-service teachers an opportunity to apply what was learned.

Critical Literacy Engagement Part I: Understanding Why Critical Literacy Is Important

The first part of the critical literacy engagement had a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it was intended to introduce the pre-service teachers to the concept that literacies are multiple and connected to social practices. On the other hand, it showed why critical literacy is needed to examine multiple literacies and their corresponding social practices.

Multiple Literacies and Social Practices

The concept of literacies intertwined with social practices is proposed by Harste (2003), who, in turn, bases his proposition on the findings of the New Literacy Studies (e.g., Finnegan, 1988; Heath, 1983; Street 1984, 1993, 1995). Harste (2003) argues:

Instead of thinking about literacy as an entity (something you either have or don’t

have), thinking about literacy as social practice can be revolutionary. When coupled with the notion of multiple literacies, literacy can be thought of as a particular set of social practices that a particular set of people value. In order to change anyone's definition of literacy, the social practices that keep a particular (and often older) definition of literacy in place have to change. (p. 8)

The notion of literacy regarded as a particular set of social practices implies that different sociocultural groups have different ways of understanding, and expressing their understanding of, the world through language, art, music, movement, etc. There are terms/concepts unique in a sociocultural group that are difficult for people in another sociocultural group to grasp. For example, the term/concept "Costco" (an American multinational corporation which operates a chain of membership-only warehouse clubs) is so familiar to people in the United States that it has become part of their lives. Yet in a country where there are no such huge retailers, it is a term/concept hard to understand, and there is no direct translation for it. Therefore, it is the social practices that keep the definition of literacy, such as Costco in this case, in place and make it meaningful.

I began the first part of the critical literacy engagement by writing the word "duck" on the board and asked the pre-service teachers to jot down on a piece of paper what came to their minds when they saw or heard this word. The connections they made to "duck" often included "a bird," "a bird with feathers," "cute little ducklings," "quack," "ducks in a lake," etc., which were listed on the board. I did not comment on, or ask why they came up with, the connections before everyone had a chance to contribute to the list. Sometimes, I was pleased to hear such connections as "It reminds me of hunting," "I like roasted duck," and "You duck when a ball comes toward you" because these connections were different from the rest. A few pre-service teachers even chose to draw about ducks instead of writing about them.

After the list seemed to be exhaustive, I asked the pre-service teachers why they made the connections. Their reasons ranged from one simple statement such as "It's cute" to a long story about a duck hunting expedition. My next question for them was, "Why does the same word 'duck' mean different things to you?" This question pushed the pre-service teachers to think about how a word is given a meaning or meanings. My goal was to guide the pre-service teachers to understand that the word "duck" is interpreted in many ways because we have different "experiences" with it. Furthermore, our experiences are closely tied to our social practices (Harste, 2003). For example, I asked one of the pre-service teachers why she thought the duck was cute. She said that she fed ducks in the lake near her house when she was little. She loved the way they ate and thought that they were so cute. In this case, the duck was given a meaning, i.e., "It's cute," based on her past experience or social practice with the duck. It is a social practice because the experience of feeding ducks is shared by other people as well. Similarly, the word "duck" reminded another pre-service teacher of his duck hunting experience (again, his social practice). Therefore, duck hunting stood out among other connections due to his experience with ducks. For those who chose to draw, they shared interesting stories about their drawings. Through the first part of the critical literacy engagement, the pre-service teachers were able to understand that literacies are multiple and tied closely to different social practices. The pre-service teachers became aware that people have different interpretations of the seemingly same phenomenon, e.g., the duck, due to their different experiences/social practices.

Why Is Critical Literacy Needed?

Though literacies along with their social practices should be respected and included in the classroom, Nieto (2010) warns us that because we are “concerned with equity and social justice, and because the basic values of different groups are often diametrically opposed, conflict is bound to occur” (p. 257). Therefore, teaching literacies as multiple social practices should be based on the understanding that social practices are not fixed, but subject to critique. Passively accepting the status quo of any set of social practices is simply perpetuating the ideologies embedded in those practices. Yet substituting one myth for another without critique contradicts the fact that no literacies, along with their social practices, are superior to the others. Therefore, while assuming an inclusive attitude toward different social practices is important, embracing uncritically any social practice as legitimate is unacceptable. To include literacies and their social practices in literacy education is not to romanticize and embrace them blindly, but to acknowledge that differences exist and should be examined critically. This is where critical literacy comes into play.

To demonstrate the importance of critical literacy, I asked the pre-service teachers if it was right to embrace a social practice where women are not allowed to be educated or drive a car without a male’s company simply because of their gender. Not surprisingly, all of the pre-service teachers disagreed with such a social practice. While this example might seem a bit “foreign” to the pre-service teachers, I asked if they could find any social practice that was questionable in the education profession. “What does a typical elementary teacher look like?” I continued. One pre-service teacher said, “White, middle-class.” Another pre-service teacher added, “Usually female.” “Look at the people around you in our classroom,” I said, “and what do you see?” Though most of them were silent, what they saw corroborated what they said about a typical elementary teacher – White, middle-class, and female. “This is a typical social phenomenon or practice in our profession, but should it be examined critically?” I suggested. “Does it mean that if you are not White, middle-class, and female, you can’t be an elementary teacher?” I added. I was pleased to hear the pre-service teachers say in unison, “No!” The above back-and-forth dialogue with the pre-service teachers helped them understand that while multiple literacies/social practices should be included in the classroom, they should be also examined critically.

Critical Literacy Engagement Part II: Seeing an Example of How to Put Critical Literacy into Practice

After the pre-service teachers understood the importance of critical literacy, the second part of the critical literacy engagement showed them how to put critical literacy into practice through Lewison, Leland, and Harste’s (2015) four dimensions of critical social practice (FDCSP). FDCSP is the backbone of the instructional model of critical literacy developed by Lewison, et al. (2015). FDCSP was chosen because it is the result of a comprehensive review of research on critical literacy for a period of three decades. FDCSP is not simply based on one single research study, but represents the studies done by many researchers and practitioners in different settings and times. In addition, FDCSP clearly lays out the key features/dimensions of critical literacy that help set the stage for exploring what critical literacy can look like in practice. Therefore, FDCSP is a theoretically-based framework that serves as guidelines for putting critical literacy into practice. However, it is important to note that FDCSP is not claimed to be representative of all the theorizing about critical literacy, nor is it supposed to be inclusive of all the critical literacy practices. FDCSP is a framework characteristic of the common features of critical literacy among a plethora of theoretical accounts and practitioner-authored narratives of critical literacy that have appeared in the academic and professional literature.

FDCSP consists of four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action to promote social justice. The first dimension, disrupting the commonplace, is to question the routines, beliefs, habits, theories, practices, etc. that we encounter and are used to in our lives. It focuses on interrogating our everyday world, including “how social norms are communicated through the various arenas of popular culture and how identities are shaped by these experiences” (Lewison, et al., 2015, p. 8). To paraphrase Luke (2013) and Luke and Freebody (1997, 1999), this dimension interrogates texts by asking how the texts try to position us. The second dimension, interrogating multiple viewpoints, is meant to make difference visible and subject it to critical scrutiny instead of striving for consensus and conformity. Luke and Freebody (1997, 1999) suggest that multiple and contradictory accounts of an event be juxtaposed to investigate whose voices are heard and whose voices are missing. The third dimension focuses on the sociopolitical issues such as gender bias, bullying, and poverty that are related to students’ lives. It goes beyond the personal concerns and attempts to situate them in the sociopolitical contexts/systems (Boozer, Maras, & Brummett, 1999). The last dimension is taking action to promote social justice. It is aligned with Freire’s (1984) proposition that literacy learners should be actors rather than spectators in the world. The purpose is to empower the underprivileged to challenge and redefine unequal power relations and take action to transform their status quo. While each of the four dimensions has its own focus, they are actually intertwined. For example, action can be hardly taken without first disrupting and recognizing the biased norm.

To illustrate how to apply FDCSP in analyzing a text, I read a children’s book, *Visiting Day* by Woodson (2002), aloud to the pre-service teachers first. *Visiting Day* features a little girl and her grandmother who wake up early to prepare for the trip to visit the little girl’s father in prison. There are smiles of excited anticipation as her grandma fries chicken and braids the little girl’s hair before they catch the bus. The bus ride has a festive air as the riders share lunch. Finally, they arrive at the prison where the little girl’s father waits eagerly to see his daughter and mother. Once home, Grandma reassures the girl that one day, they will be able to wake up and have Daddy right there in their house again. A children’s book such as *Visiting Day* was used for analysis because it appeals to a wide audience, focuses on a story, and is told with humor and unforgettable language (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013). It presents issues in a way to which readers can relate. Therefore, a children’s book is used to make a difficult concept, i.e., critical literacy in this case, more manageable for the pre-service teachers to grasp. A children’s book also offers a feasible way for the pre-service teachers to introduce elementary students to an otherwise-difficult-to-understand concept or issue.

After the reading of *Visiting Day*, the pre-service teachers were given some time to discuss in small groups how this story related to FDCSP. Then they came together as a whole class to share what they had come up with in small groups. Below was a synopsis of the class discussion.

First Dimension: Disrupting the Commonplace

Disrupting the commonplace is questioning the norm, the routine, or what most of the people do or take for granted. It is “seeing the everyday through new lenses” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, pp. 382-383). A commonplace is a routine or, sometimes, a bias that is practiced, but seldom questioned in our society. *Visiting Day* presents a type of family in sharp contrast

to a so-called typical family where there are two parents (a mom and a dad) living with, and caring for, their children. It is usually taken for granted that parents are supposed to take care of their children. This is especially true when the children are little or at school age and dependent on their parents. Therefore, it is a social norm or commonplace that children live with, and are looked after by, their parents. When I asked the pre-service teachers what they thought of a family, most of them agreed that a family typically consists of a mom, a dad, and children. Some of the pre-service teachers said that sometimes, there is only one parent living with children in a family. This commonplace about a family, however, is disrupted in *Visiting Day* where the little girl does not have parents around, but stays with her grandmother. The little girl is not taken care of by either of her parents, but by her grandmother.

Second Dimension: Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints

Interrogating multiple viewpoints highlights the importance of examining an issue from multiple angles in order to have a better understanding of the issue. The voices of the incarcerated and their families are usually unheard in a mainstream society. Our view of the incarcerated often comes from the perspective of those other than the incarcerated and their families. The pre-service teachers agreed that *Visiting Day* presented voices from the marginalized and helped them see the incarceration issue from different perspectives. For example, in *Visiting Day*, the incarceration issue is presented primarily from the little girl's perspective. She is looking forward to that one day a month to visit her father and tell him everything that has happened over the month. Similarly, the little girl's grandmother and father are also waiting eagerly for the visiting day to come. In addition, the perspectives of the families of other prisoners are presented. The voice of the little girl's mother, however, is missing in the book, leaving the readers wondering whether her mother is still around with the little girl. It is important to include the voices of the prisoners' families in the story because their voices are usually silent in a mainstream society. Therefore, *Visiting Day* presents voices from the marginalized and helps us see the issue from their perspectives.

Third Dimension: Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues

Focusing on sociopolitical issues is going beyond the personal and attempting to understand the sociopolitical systems to which we belong. While the pre-service teachers identified a few sociopolitical issues, such as parenting and poverty, discussed in *Visiting Day*, they agreed that the main sociopolitical issue was how to educate and support the children of the incarcerated. *Visiting Day*, on the surface, consists mainly of a story about a little girl, her grandmother, and her incarcerated father. Yet by presenting multiple voices from a family with a father in prison, the author goes beyond the personal level and brings a sociopolitical issue, e.g., how to educate and support children with incarcerated parents, to the attention of the readers. In fact, situating a personal issue within a sociopolitical context helps us better understand the personal issue and how it relates to, and is shaped by, the broad sociopolitical system. For example, in *Visiting Day*, the little girl has a father in prison. The issue is usually considered a personal problem and should be dealt with by the little girl and her family. However, when their problem is considered in relation to a broad sociopolitical context, it is no longer a personal issue, but may become such a social issue as how to educate and support children whose parents are incarcerated.

Fourth Dimension: Taking Action to Promote Social Justice

Critical literacy is not simply a topic of conversation, but serves to empower literacy learners to act as humans with agency – humans who have the potential for making positive change. This line of thinking, i.e., taking action to promote social justice, is aligned with Giroux and Giroux's (2004) view that knowledge "is about more than understanding; it is also about the possibilities of self-determination, individual autonomy, and social agency" (p. 84). A critical awareness of literacy education is still not critical literacy unless action is taken. Freire (1984) urges us to be actors instead of spectators and argues that critical literacy/pedagogy should be a true praxis which consists of reflection as well as action.

I asked the pre-service teachers what action they as future educators could take, after reading *Visiting Day*, to promote social justice or to make our society a better place. One possible action they suggested that teachers should take was to reflect critically on their practice to see if they take the time to understand their students' lives outside of school that may affect the students' academic performance in school. For example, if their students do not live with parents, homework assignments should be designed in a way that the students can complete independently. Otherwise, additional support should be provided to the students who do not have access to parental support at home. In other words, the pre-service teachers believed that teachers should take action to examine their own teaching first before blaming or victimizing their students. The pre-service teachers were aware that to be critically literate is not only knowledgeable of literacy skills such as reading and writing, but also willing to put knowledge into practice.

Critical Literacy Engagement Part III: Applying What Was Learned

After the pre-service teachers saw how to use FDCSP through children's literature, the third part of the critical literacy engagement invited them to apply what they had learned. Specifically, the pre-service teachers had to connect each dimension of FDCSP to a children's book of their own choosing. For the fourth dimension (taking action to promote social justice), they had to suggest what action to take to promote social justice. The pre-service teachers were given a week to find an appropriate children's book for this assignment. After they came back with their children's book, one class period (approximately three hours) was set aside for them to work in small groups on this assignment. I was available in class to conference with those who had questions about the assignment. At the end, each group was invited to present the assignment before their peers. Seeing their classmates' presentations also helped them clarify possible confusion, investigate critical literacy from multiple perspectives, and enhance their understanding.

In addition, the pre-service teachers were required to read a children's book to elementary students during their practicum and help them analyze the book by using the FDCSP framework. A report had to be written to document what they did with the elementary students. For example, one group of three pre-service teachers were placed in a fourth grade classroom in a local elementary school with a very diverse student population. The pre-service teachers chose to read and analyze *Maddi's Fridge* by Brandt and Vogel (2014) with their elementary students. *Maddi's Fridge*, briefly, is about two girls, Maddi and Sophia, living in the same neighborhood. Maddi and Sophia go to the same school and play in the same park together. The difference is that Sophia's fridge at home is full of healthy food while the fridge at Maddi's house is usually empty. Sophia learns that Maddi's family does not have enough money to fill the fridge. Maddi becomes embarrassed and asks Sophia to

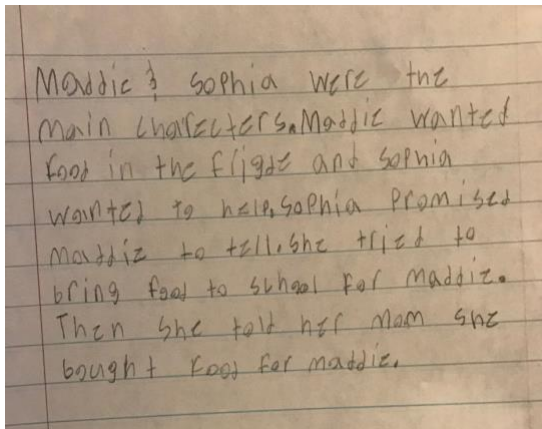
keep it a secret that her fridge is empty. Sophia promises to keep the secret, but then is faced with a decision of possibly telling her parents, so they can help Maddi with her empty fridge.

The pre-service teachers chose to use *Maddi's Fridge* because it was a real situation of which not all elementary students were aware. The pre-service teachers wrote in their report:

The majority of students attending Bloomfield Elementary [a pseudonym] come from poverty stricken families. Students at Bloomfield are often given what they call "Blessings in a Backpack," which is a small bag of a few food items to take home for the weekend. It is very possible that several students at Bloomfield have little to no food in their refrigerator at home. After reading this book and having a discussion, children may learn more about poverty and sensitivity. Students may learn that they shouldn't be embarrassed if this is a situation that they are in and that there are people willing to help them.

After reading and analyzing *Maddi's Fridge* with the elementary students, the pre-service teachers took a step further to organize a food drive to let the elementary students know that they could make a difference:

We closed the lesson by allowing the students together to fill up gallon-sized bags with food to donate to those in need. This was a very exciting experience for these students to have in knowing they were helping make a difference for someone else.



(Figure 1: Book Summary)



(Figure 2: Food bag)

Figure 1 is a sample book summary one of the elementary students came up with after the pre-service teachers' reading of *Maddi's Fridge*. The summary showed that the elementary student had a good understanding of the book. In addition, through the pre-service teachers' guidance, the elementary students learned to put their knowledge of the book into action by putting together food bags as shown in Figure 2. This example demonstrated that the pre-service teachers and their students did not only understand critical literacy, but also put it into practice by making a positive impact on the community around them.

Conclusion

In this paper, I shared my teaching experience of why critical literacy is needed and how to make it accessible to pre-service teachers through a critical literacy engagement. The pre-service teachers were shown why literacy is not simply a set of academic skills such as

reading and writing, but also concerned with multiple social practices. The broader definition of literacies associated with multiple social practices entails the use of critical literacy to evaluate different social practices instead of embracing them blindly. The pre-service teachers were also introduced to FDCSP as it provides feasible dimensions for newcomers to put critical literacy into practice. The pre-service teachers also demonstrated their understanding of critical literacy by implementing a critical literacy assignment with the elementary students during their practicum.

Indisputably, it is challenging to implement critical literacy in the classroom, especially for pre-service teachers who are still learning about, and have little experience with, critical literacy. It is worth reiterating that using children's books, as one of the key features of the critical literacy engagement presented in this paper, is a viable way to introduce pre-service teachers to critical literacy. Children's books present difficult issues in a way that is comprehensible to adults as well as children while the significance of the issues conveyed in the books is not compromised. For example, Kim Huber documented how she helped her first-grade students explore a children's book and take action to change their community (Leland & Huber, 2015). Specifically, Huber's school participated in a food drive for a local food pantry, and her students were reminded each morning and right before going home for the day to bring in more food items. There was even a contest set up to see which class could bring in the most items. To help her students understand the meaning of a food drive, Huber decided to read to her students a children's book, *The Lady in the Box* (McGovern, 1997), where two children along with their mother help a homeless lady living outside in a box close to a warm air vent of a deli. The next day, "the children came in loaded down with more items. No one made a comment about winning, but instead they talked of how the food would be used by people who did not have enough to eat" (Leland & Huber, 2015, p. 70). *The Lady in the Box* is narrated from a boy's and a girl's perspectives and makes the homeless issue relatable to children. Similarly, through the reading of a children's book, *Maddi's Fridge*, the pre-service teachers and their fourth-grade students, as mentioned previously in this paper, decided to put together food bags to donate to a local charity. These two examples show that children's books serve as a powerful tool to make critical literacy accessible to educators and students who are new to critical literacy.

Critical literacy has been intensively researched and become widely known in academia, but it does not seem to take root in the classroom. I hope this paper will help mitigate the discrepancy between theory and practice in critical literacy and serve as an invitation to all literacy educators/practitioners to put what they "know" about critical literacy into what they can "do" in the classroom.

Author Notes

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