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Anne Gregory
Boise State University

Mary Ann Cahill
Boise State University

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Constructing critical literacy: Self-reflexive ways for curriculum and pedagogy

Anne E. Gregory

Mary Ann Cahill

Boise State University, Boise, Idaho, USA

Abstract

Schools have the potential to be places where students can come to understand how and why knowledge and power are constructed (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). This paper provides an overview of critical literacy from a critical theory/Freirian perspective. Within it, critical literacy is posited as a necessary component of all classroom practices, one that is elemental to Dewey's (1916) view of democracy, social justice, and what it means to be literate. Features of a critical literacy approach to instruction are provided along with rationales for the necessity of its inclusion in a democratic society.

Introduction

Working and living in our ever-changing world necessitates that we think about and practice literacy for lifelong learning in new ways. This is especially true when considering how critical theorists describe the potential of schools as places where students come to understand how and why knowledge and power are constructed (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). As an application of critical theory, critical literacy involves "reading the world" so that we can come to understand how we encode power structures and the roles we play in these processes (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Constructing critical literacy involves education at all levels, from primary education through adult learning.

As communication theorists (e.g. Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996) have long contended, knowledge is power. However, such power is seldom spread equitably across cultural or income groups (Delpit, 1995). This unequal distribution, concomitantly linked to inequities in the knowledge and information that is shared, compounds the inequities in social power and status (Neuman, 2001). The purpose of this paper is to position critical literacy as a necessary component of all classroom practices, one that is elemental to both democracy and being literate. We begin by defining literacy as a means to illustrate the inherent relationship between it and critical literacy. This is followed by a definition of critical literacy that illustrates the risks associated with adopting a critical literacy perspective in elementary classrooms in particular. We then illustrate features of a critical literacy approach to instruction replete with rationales for the necessity of its inclusion in a democratic society, and relate possible avenues for implementing this praxis within all classrooms.

What is Literacy?

Before any discussion can begin examining the role and necessity of critical literacy in classrooms, an obligatory examination of what is meant by literacy is needed. Traditionally considered to be an individual's ability to read (National Institute for Literacy, 1998), contemporary definitions typically extend the concept of literacy to include what Freire and

Macedo (1987) would describe as emancipatory literacy (i.e. the notion that literate individuals are able to function independently and flexibly in society). While this is a more encompassing definition and, perhaps, is suitable for defining the literacy required for citizenship in a democracy, it fails to recognize our complicity in the acts of defining literacy, legitimizing those definitions, and the naming that occurs as a result of this process (Fleischer & Schaafsma, 1998; Whitehead, 2007).

Further complications for defining literacy additionally occur when we consider that the main business of school is to facilitate, in some form, literacy in children— to help them become "literate" (Whitehead, 2007). We know that institutions like schooling and government support and perpetuate ideologies that legitimate and authenticate knowledge, reproducing inequality and injustice through the practices employed (Beck, 2005; Giroux, 1987; McLaren, 1988). By attempting to define literacy as an inert set of practices and/or skills, we run the risk of acquiescing to a form of "political correctness" in which certain forms of thinking, doing, and acting become valued (Knoblach & Brannon, 1993). We contend, as Knoblach and Brannon (1993) state, that literacy "is and must always be ideologically situated…qualified by the context of assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, and related conceptual material that accompanies its use by particular groups of people in particular sociohistorical circumstances" (p.15). As such it is dynamic, similar to Dewey's (1991) conception of democracy, and becomes a "way of life" in which all individuals are participatory in self-governance and the addressing of issues of social inequality. With this taken into account, it can be seen that at the most elemental level of literacy resides critical literacy; this is particularly true when thinking about what it means to be literate. In other words, to be literate suggests that there are political and ethical considerations inevitably tied to achieving literacy, and that living in a society based upon Dewey's envisioned democracy requires dialogue, a key aspect of critical literacy (Fleischer & Schaafsma, 1998).

Defining and Positioning Critical Literacy

We contend that reading, writing, speaking, and doing are socially situated and constructed practices that create our "identity kit" as we participate in language use, and that these practices are embedded in discourse communities shaped by differing cultural knowledge bases, practices, and values (Gee, 1992). However, we know that for some access to and awareness of the codes of the culture of power (Delpit, 1995) are often disallowed and/or de-legitimized leaving them unaware of their own historicity—the "understanding of how one's immersion in a particular culture and subcultures at a particular moment in time affects one's world view" (Hinchey, 2001, p.2). In this way, literacy acts a cultural tool that provides us with capital, where capital is seen as cultural and social ways of being and doing that are represented and embodied in individuals as a habitus or part of a socially recognized credential (Bourdieu, 1991). Critical literacy, as part of our set of cultural tools, provides us with the means for reflection and action as we engage in examining our social worlds.

Ciardiello (2004) suggests that critical literacy is a "set of practices and civic competencies that help the learner develop a critical awareness that texts represent particular points of view while often silencing others" (p.138). Comber (2001) adds that critical literacy is the use of language in powerful ways to get things done in the world, enhance life in school, and to question privilege and injustice. Shannon (1995) states further that critical literacy is literacy that brings with it the freedom to explore and act on our past, present, and future. The critical literacy perspective that we assume in this paper shares commonalities with these and presupposes a sociological perspective of reading, writing and speaking in which "teaching and learning to read is about teaching and learning standpoints, cultural expectations, norms of social actions and consequences" (Luke & Freebody, 1997, pp. 208-209). From this vantage, critical literacy

becomes more than a tool; it becomes, instead, a form of cultural capital that provides us with awareness of our historicity.

Adopting this position, we are able to begin to problematize terms and contexts that are prevalent in our teaching world; terms like children's literature, media for children, kinderculture and contexts where language is used to constitute meaning and things as well as ourselves (e.g. school, the classroom, reading groups, etc.). Engaging in such problematization, however, creates tension in our ways of being and doing in classrooms; it is what we choose to do in relation to that tension that defines our purpose either as one of educating or one of schooling (Apple, 2004). We assert that it is the recognition of this tension that becomes the responsibility of educators at all levels. It should begin in the classrooms of the youngest children in our schools so they may grow to become lifelong practitioners of critical literacy who question and transform social injustice in our world fulfilling the promise of Dewey's (1916) purpose for education—democracy.

Rejecting the Tension

If we choose to reject this tension and not engage in beginning to question, then we commit ourselves to the purpose of schooling (Apple, 2004). We become complicit in perpetuating the dominant ideology; employing a banking concept of education that enables us, through our instruction, to confer the knowledge we have to those less knowledgeable disavowing the funds of knowledge that our students bring with them ((Freire, 1970; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). By embracing such a reductionistic course of action, we are conscripting the "identity kits" of our students, membership within a group of people who have "allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices" that connect them as a group (Gee, 1992, 2001, p.105). Such conscription allows our students and ourselves to remain blind to the injustices that surround us.

Such acceptance of current and dominant ideologies may be motivated by fear. It may be a fear of the unknown; it may be a fear of reprisals from those in positions of power. Whatever the source of this fear, when we reject the tension, we are allowing it to drive the curricular choices we make. Curriculum, in this instance, can no longer provide a learner with the opportunity for envisioning the possible (Vasquez, 2001). Through this rejection of tension we are, in fact, manipulating our student's construction of subjectivity or "the ways in which a person gives meaning to themselves, others and the world" (Davies & Banks, 1992, p. 2). Here, we are not suggesting that students do not have agency within social structures like the classroom, but rather, that they learn and are shaped by the social meanings and practices/discourses in which they participate while they are there. It is within our classrooms, to a large extent, that students learn to position themselves as readers, writers, and learners as they begin to navigate their role within the larger society.

This suggests that classrooms that reject the tension are moving away from a democratic purpose of education (Dewey, 1916). They are shaping a process of educating which privileges some ways of being, doing, and operating within the world; the antithesis of a free and open society (i.e. one in which free exchanges of ideas, information, and communication about experiences or other's outside of one's group occur). These are classrooms which maintain and perpetuate dogma that text (i.e. printed materials) give meaning as opposed to contain meaning that is constructed and negotiated by the reader. Perhaps more importantly, it is within these classrooms that reading and writing are detached from "ways of being in the world" (Gee, 1992, 2001).

Adopting a Critical Stance

If, however, we decide to contend with the tension, then a critical stance is necessary. A critical stance requires that you read not only the words/pictures/actions/sounds/etc. but "read the world" to understand a text and its purpose (Freire, 1970). Here a text is seen as more than print on paper; rather, it is a "vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society"(Robinson & Robinson, 2003, p.3). In this light, all forms of communication (e.g., songs, novels, conversations, movies, art, photographs, etc.) are considered to be texts. Furthermore, "the development of critical literacy encourages students to question issues of power—explicitly disparities within social contexts like socio-economic status, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc." (Coffey, 2008, p. 2). Accepting contending with the tension requires a personal use and understanding of critical literacy that is "based in a firm theorization that locates critical literacy in a collection of skills, understandings, and dispositions urgently needed by students to face the contemporary and future vocational, civic, and domestic experiences lying in wait for them" (Freebody, 2008, p. 115), an important aspect for realizing Dewey's vision of democracy. It requires the ability and inclination to "read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships" (Coffey, 2008, p. 1).

According to Janks (2000) there are four orientations to critical literacy education based on varying views of the relationship between power and language. Through the *domination perspective*, educators examine how positions of social and political domination are maintained through the use of language and signs. From an *access perspective*, educators provide access to language and language structures of the dominant group while maintaining the integrity of nondominant language and structure use. This is an approach that is advocated in the work of Lisa Delpit (1995) when she discusses that it is the responsibility of the teacher to accept students while at the same taking responsibility for teaching them; she advocates especially strongly that access to the codes of power (i.e. the rules for participating in power) be provided. Those educators working from a *diversity perspective* give attention to the way that language is used to create or legitimize social identities. While through the use of a *design perspective*, the need for selecting from signs and semiotic systems are emphasized. Here the reproduction of social life as produced by semiotic systems (e.g. language) is examined as representations of reality, the building of identity (i.e. social, communal, and individual), as well as the means by which we act and relate socially (Fairclough, 1989, 2003). While these perspectives, or orientations, may guide an educator, it is necessary that all four of these perspectives must work together to provide balance to one another to achieve the social justice goal of critical literacy. Without this integration of efforts, practicing critical literacy pedagogies is subject to challenges based upon bias or subjectivity (Freebody, 2008).

A subject of criticisms for the inclusion of critical literacy pedagogies in classrooms is that there is not a prescription or a methodology for 'doing' critical literacy (Behrman, 2006). It is argued that critical literacy often leaves available too many options. As such, oftentimes the most comfortable stance to take for the educator is some version of reader response theory, a conservative resort to the practice of critical literacy (Freebody, 2008). What must be foregrounded in light of such criticism is that "critical literacy needs to be continually redefined in practice" (Comber, 2001, p. 100) and adapted to the local context (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). "A critical literacy curriculum needs to be lived. It arises from the social and political conditions that unfold in communities in which we live. As such it cannot be traditionally taught" (Vasquez, 2003, p. 12). Educators need to view children's resistance to stories and /or instruction as being indicative of "their expanding interests and capabilities in their more general life experiences" (Applebee, 1977, p. 344). Viewing these times as "windows onto how children

are experiencing reading and how they are experiencing life—how…children are learning to "read the world" as well as the word" (Sipe & McGuire, 2006, p. 6).

Principles of Critical Literacy Education

Initiating the use of practices which promote the development of critical literacy entails minimally an examination and reformation, although a possible transformation may occur, of the social contexts and environments that students interact with, exposing them to the hidden agendas and biases of texts (Simpson, 1996; Lohrey, 1998; Luke, 2000). McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) state that there are four understandings regarding the relationship between the reader and the author that underpin critical literacy. These are: a focus on issues of power that promotes reflection, transformation, and action; a focus on the problem and its complexity; the use of techniques that are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used; and an examination of multiple perspectives. Each of these provide classroom instruction opportunities separately and synergistically, which eventually lead to experiencing text with a critical lens.

Issues of Power. When reading texts, readers submit to the power of the author (i.e., "the right to select a topic and determine the treatment of the ideas" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p.54)). This submission, however, does not mitigate the power of readers, as they are able to question the perspective provided, examine issues of power and voice, and reflect upon what actions are required. To accomplish these actions, readers must draw upon their background knowledge as they work to create/transform the existing context

When exploring the issues of power, creating a context in which readers can readily access background knowledge provides a springboard for investigation. This is especially critical with young readers. This can be achieved by asking children questions such as: Who is the boss in your family? Were you ever the boss? Do you have any power yourself in making decisions for your family? Should children have a dominant voice in the family (Ciardiello, 2004)? By contextualizing issues of power in a way which directly taps into schema, the beginnings of instructional scaffolding can occur. In order to have a meaningful, critical conversation about issues of social justice, a pathway must be built using explicit connections between issues of power and the role of power in the lives of the readers.

Problem and Complexity. The roles of critically literate readers are to problematize issues of power, domination, the silencing of voices, and nonexistence within texts. This may be accomplished through inquiries into other possibilities and explanations, through questioning to understand the complexity of a problem or issue. To begin to do this, however, educators must move beyond essentialistic paradigms of the realities of both classrooms and the texts used within them. In a study with children between three and five years of age, Vasquez (2007) used the activity of re-designing a popular snack packaging to create curricular space for children to name and discuss how language works on consumers, to deconstruct this use of language in texts, to re-conceptualize the use of language, and to examine the ideologies of an everyday text (i.e. "texts that are spoken or written as part of everyday life" (p.7)). The children in this study were actively involved in examining the texts that construct their realities; they were engaged in problematizing and exploring the complexity of their world. While this is seen in critical literacy work with older students (Luke, 1994; Shannon, 1995; Simpson, 1996), mention of this possibility is often absent in works targeted for use with preschool and elementary students (Vasquez, 2001). However, this need not be the case, as Vasquez's study demonstrates.

Dynamic and Adaptable Techniques. As alluded to earlier, there is not a list of methodologies that can be presupposed to work in all contexts in the same or even similar ways (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Instead, fundamental to educators' endeavors in such arenas, assessment must be used to examine and problematize the resistance students may exhibit in the classroom in relation to both texts and instruction in order to better determine if the experience is faithful to a critical literacy stance (Applebee, 1977). By its nature, this process is dynamic and adjustable to the context in which it is being employed. This flexibility comes from the empowerment we assume as we engage in the process with others; questioning and asserting different possibilities for the relationships we have as we engage and read the world.

In working with younger readers, researchers have found success in using traditional fairy tales, and popular picture books. Bourke (2008) explored these concepts using texts such as *The Three Billy Goats Gruff, Jack and the Beanstalk,* and *Rumpelstiltskin* with his first graders. In doing this, he nudged the children to explore questions such as: Why is the troll so mean? Why did the author make the troll so mean? How do you think the troll feels? Could things have happened differently? This allowed the children to explore issues of privilege and power within a familiar context, while pushing them to question various representations of "good" and "bad", and perhaps develop empathy for the antagonist. In another study, Ciardiello (2004) explored the use of *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* (Cronin, 2000) to identify the dominant voice (Farmer Brown), and how he attempts to silence the animals' requests. The animals in the story use their own authentic voices to gain access to previously denied concessions. Explicitly pointing these concepts out to young readers provides a forum in which they can engage in critical discussions and explore issues of power.

Multiple Perspectives. Conveying ideas from a multiplicity of perspectives challenges all involved in the education process to expand their thinking and discover diverse points of views, beliefs, positions, and understandings (McLaughlin, 2001). To do this within a classroom requires first that multiplicities of perspectives are voiced in authentic ways. The concept here is that not only are classrooms engaged in critical literacy full of a wide variety of materials, but that these materials are authentic representations of the myriad of voices concerned or related to the problem being considered.

With younger children, this can easily be achieved by giving them "power as a writer" (Bourke, 2008). Offering children an opportunity to rewrite a story from a different perspective grants them agency to adjust or realign the power in the story. In doing this, children can explore how the power of one character inevitably affects the actions of all the characters. Another powerful tool for exploring multiple perspectives is the use of graphic organizers (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). This can be done easily using a book such as *I Am the Dog, I Am the Cat* and a graphic organizer to display two different perspectives of the same experience allows students to see the differences more clearly.

Also important in examining multiple perspectives is acknowledging the disconnections as well as the connections. Allowing readers an opportunity to acknowledge the fact that they cannot connect with the text in some ways, that these experiences are outside of their schema, gives them agency to build respect for alternative experiences (Jones & Clarke, 2007). It is valuable to facilitate an exploration with students of what is similar to their lives and also what is different, as this allows them to situate themselves into the larger context.

In the classroom, a focus on critical literacy encourages a deeper look at texts; specifically examining the relationships among texts, language, power, social groups and social practices. In a broad sense, this means examining meaning within and between texts, considering the purpose for text, questioning and challenging the ways in which texts have been constructed

and providing students with opportunities to take a stand on social issues through considering and clarifying their own attitudes and values (Morgan, 1998).

Examining Multiple Perspectives

An integral aspect of teaching critical literacy skills is providing opportunities for students to examine text from multiple perspectives. Many students tend to adopt a passive stance when presented with a piece of text, never having been encouraged or taught to question a text, analyze the author's viewpoint or explore differing perspectives. Simpson (1996) states that stories are not reflections of reality, but are selective versions of it, told from a particular view. In this manner, the author positions the reader to respond to a story in particular ways through the use of language, point of view, and other literary tools. Providing spaces in the classroom to engage in critical text analysis via juxtaposing texts, supplying alternative endings, role playing and role reversal offer students a means to view the text from multiple perspectives. The teacher can lead the students in this endeavor by presenting information to the students in the following format:

1) Immersion
2) Prediction
3) Deconstruction
4) Reconstruction
5) Taking Social Action (Adams & Campagna-Wildash, 1995)

Immersion. Initially the notion of multiple perspectives is presented to the students through personal stories, picture books, video, television, or chapter book - essentially any form of text which relates to the topic at hand. During this time, the teacher encourages the students to engage in critical conversation looking at situations presented via text from differing perspectives. Immersion at this point implies both a saturation of textual resources as well as a series of critical discussions. At this point, the students begin to ask critical questions. It is important that the questions are the students' own questions. Simpson (1996) explains that it is important for the questions to have been self-generated in order for the students to begin to be critical explorers of text. The goal here is that the students begin to recognize and explore the unequal discourse in text, paying attention to those voices that are silenced or marginalized (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Some questions the students may ask are: Whose voice is not being heard; who benefits from this reading; how is the author positioning me; what were the authors' motives in creating this text? (Luke & Freebody, 1997).

Prediction. During the prediction phase, the students engage in a fact gathering mission. They gather descriptors of each perspective and compare and contrast these, recording in the form of graphic organizer or poster. It is at this point that the thinking and conversation engaged in during the immersion phase becomes visual. This is important, as these descriptors will be revisited during the deconstruction phase. The students are encouraged to reach consensus about the descriptors for each perspective.

Deconstruction. As the students begin to engage in deconstruction, they revisit the texts explored in the immersion phase, this time guided by critical questions which have been created during the prediction phase. Here the examined texts, or a subset of the texts, are taken apart in small portions and examined critically through the questions. This is an adaptation of problem-posing that provides a space for the children to use their own background knowledge to critically examine what is missing, underrepresented or overrepresented in a text and then research that perspective (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). When this is complete, the students return to the

visual representations of the perspectives to compare them to how they were represented in the deconstructed text. This comparison provides opportunities for further discussion related to the critical questions.

Reconstruction. During the reconstruction phase, the students are prompted to create a new text which promotes equality of perspective or giving voice to a perspective previously silenced. McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2004) recommend Switching as a strategy. This strategy both highlights biases in the text as well as allows the students to compensate for biases found. Some of these switches are:

Gender switch - change the sex of the main characters

Theme switch - make up a different story with the opposite theme

Setting switch - tell the story from a different time, place or social class

Ethnic/Race switch - change characters' race/ethnic characteristics (Molden, 2007).

Taking Social Action. If the discussion has prompted strong feelings among the students, the teacher can provide opportunities to take social action in the form of letters to the editor, organizing community projects, or promoting alternative perspectives throughout the school.

Committing to Critical Literacy

We recognize that "Literacy is a critical tool for maintaining social divisions, and reading programs are designed to withhold literacy from all learners as they promote *literalcy* among the privileged classes" (Bahruth, 2004, p. 511). Here *literalcy* is defined as the literacy produced by programs that are predicated upon narrow definitions of literacy. This suggests that literacy, in and of itself, has been used as a tool to marginalize and silence the voices of those who are "other." However, it is through the adoption of a critical literacy stance that we can begin to ameliorate this process. This stance is not only a way for educators to participate in democratic communities within their classrooms, but also the means for transforming world(s) so that socially just practice is natural for all citizens in a public democracy.

Through the adoption of a critical stance, the educator first becomes critically aware; developing a personal understanding of critical literacy. From here, the evolution begins as we engage in learning and understanding; developing and changing our theoretical and pedagogical catalogs; self-reflective and reflexive ways of being and doing within both classroom spaces and our world; and remaining open to other possibilities (Comber, 2001). It is imperative for educators, students, citizens and all of the people of the world to understand how to read the word and their world and enact critical literacy practices.

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