

# Examining Critical Literacy

## Preparing Preservice Teachers to Use Critical Literacy in the Early Childhood Classroom

*Katherine Norris, Lisa Lucas, & Catherine Prudhoe*

Every semester one of the authors of this article, Catherine Prudhoe, challenges many of her preservice students' perceptions of a familiar and often favorite children's book, *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein (1964). She begins the class by reading the text aloud to the students. Most smile, fondly remembering hearing the book as a child. A few become teary-eyed as the tree selflessly gives to the boy throughout his life. After reading the text, it is then discussed. The students usually comment on how the book teaches children to share and to love their friends. They talk about their remembrances of hearing the story read to them by a parent or teacher. Everyone is feeling happy.

Then, the instructor asks the students to listen to the story again, this time paying attention to gender issues. Which gender is implied for the tree? Who is always giving and who is always taking? What messages does the story suggest for girls/women and for boys/men? As the class reads the book a second time, there is a definite change in the atmosphere of the discussion. The students begin to perceive the story in a different way. After debriefing, one brave student may say, "Well, thanks for ruining one of my favorite childhood books!" The other students will laugh and agree, however all are now more attuned to looking at texts from different perspectives.

While it's not our intention to ruin anyone's favorite childhood story book, it is our hope to develop in our students

the ability to read and teach critically. In this article, we share the way we have approached introducing our early childhood preservice teachers to critical literacy. Very few of our preservice teachers have experienced critical literacy as learners in school, so we must engage them both as simultaneous learners and prospective teachers.

### What is Critical Literacy?

All forms of communication are social and political acts that can be used to influence people and can lead to social change (Comber & Simpson, 2001). According to Freire (1970), readers are active participants in the reading process. Critical literacy encourages readers to question, explore, or challenge the power relationships that exist between authors and readers. It examines issues of power and promotes reflection, transformative change, and action.

Reading from a critical perspective involves thinking beyond the text to understand issues such as why the author wrote about a particular topic, wrote from a particular perspective, or chose to include some ideas about the topic and exclude others. (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 13)

In addition, Jones (2006) stated that

critical literacy is like a pair of eyeglasses that allows one to see beyond the familiar and comfortable: it is an understanding that language practices and texts are always informed by ideological beliefs and perspectives whether conscious or otherwise. (p. 65)

Critical literacy views text meaning-making as a process of social construction with a particularly critical eye toward elements of the various historical, social, and political contexts involved. Dozier, Johnston, and Rogers (2006) maintain

that this requires understanding literacy as a tool for social action. Examining how language is organized to reproduce race, class, and gender roles is a function of socially responsible literacy.

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) reviewed 30 years of professional literature that focused on critical literacy and found several common dimensions. They suggest that critical literacy can:

- ◆ Disrupt a common situation or understanding—where students can gain perspective by understanding the text or situation in a different way.
- ◆ Examine multiple viewpoints—where students are encouraged to think about texts from the perspectives of different characters or from those not represented in the text.
- ◆ Focus on sociopolitical issues—where students examine power relationships between and among individuals.
- ◆ Take action and promote social justice—invite students to determine a course of action to bring about change in an inappropriate, unequal power relationship between people.

It is not necessary that all of these dimensions be included to engage in critical literacy activities. By examining texts utilizing any one of these dimensions, we are engaging in critical literacy.

### Why Critical Literacy Is Important

The United States is continuing to become more diverse. In 2003, enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools was 58.7% White, 17.2% Black, 18.5 % Hispanic, 4.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1.2% American Indian/Alaska Native (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Despite this diversity among the student body, the teaching profession remains largely homogeneous. In 2004,

---

*Katherine Norris is an associate professor, Lisa Lucas is an assistant professor, and Catherine Prudhoe is a professor, all with the Department of Early and Middle Grades Preparation of the School of Education at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, West Chester, Pennsylvania.*

83.1% of public school teachers were White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Thus, teachers must be prepared to teach children from cultural backgrounds that are very different from their own.

Additionally, it is generally agreed that children need to see aspects of themselves in the curriculum. They need to read or listen to stories about people like themselves in situations similar to their own. Literacy is one way to bring children's lives into classrooms. It also can help children understand situations that are different from their own.

Through application of critical literacy, children and teachers can explore and come to understand and appreciate the similarities and differences that they have and share these with each other (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). Everyone involved can better examine and debate multiple viewpoints. Through critical literacy, children can discuss social issues and plan ways that they can have an impact on their communities.

### Critical Literacy and Children's Literature

Quintero (2009) has advocated teaching with critical literacy by using problem-posing and children's literature. The goal of this approach is to nourish an integrated curriculum that supports young children's meaningful learning. This method encourages integrated learning that is both developmentally and culturally meaningful based on interacting with story, reading literature, and participating in related learning activities.

The history of this problem-posing method dates to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory during the 1920s, and was initially used with adult literacy students. The method leads students of any age, experience, or ability level to use new learning of personal experience in a way that encourages critical reflection and focuses on active participation.

### Preservice Teachers' Role in Critical Literacy

Bean and Harper (2004) argue that preservice teachers are in a kind of limbo, caught between the worlds of student and teacher. In essence, preservice teachers must negotiate the murky terrain of multiple, and sometimes conflicting, expectations. University supervisors, cooperating teachers, students, and parents are all players in developing the perceptions that

preservice teacher construct as they think about their identities as teachers. In this push-pull arena, preservice teacher may find it difficult to adopt a critical literacy stance in their own work, let alone within the often prescriptive curriculum required and offered in today's schools.

Dozier, Johnston, and Rogers (2006) emphasize that to teach critical literacy, teachers must first become critically literate themselves, then must value social justice, and finally must have an understanding of the cultural contexts in which they work. Dozier et al. further advocate that part of critical literacy requires teachers to step outside one's self and the social and linguistic structures in which one is immersed so that they can view their current language-saturated reality as one that is constantly changing and evolving.

Fennimore (2000) maintains that successful teacher preparation programs need to be constructed upon a commitment to activism as well as to excellence in pedagogical practice. Teachers must understand the significance of the representational properties of language. Fundamentally, the sense we make of things is constructed through language. Since such language is expressed almost automatically, thus typically outside of our conscious awareness. Thus, it is important to make teachers aware of their language practices in ways that do not make them defensive (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006).

### Critical Literacy and Culturally Responsive Teaching

In order to prepare teacher candidates to teach all children effectively, teacher education programs must develop teachers who understand and can implement culturally responsive pedagogy (Irvine, 2001). Bowers and Flinders (1990) suggest that culturally responsive teachers will create effective learning opportunities that reflect the cultural diversity of their classrooms. In her book, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Ladson-Billings (1994) explains that culturally relevant teaching "...empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 18).

Culturally responsive teaching arises from a critical perspective. Teachers must address issues of inequity that occur in their classrooms, communities, and society at large. A curriculum that focuses on issues of diversity, such as race, culture,

language, and gender, and sees children's questions as important will be both socially just and culturally responsive.

Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges differences among diverse students and the need for those students to find connections between themselves and the school and/or curriculum (Montgomery, 2001). In culturally responsive classrooms, teachers recognize the need to develop instructional strategies which meet the needs of all students.

Critical literacy is culturally responsive pedagogy. It engages teachers and students in thought-provoking discussions that connect their lives to the texts. It challenges readers to question, to disagree, and to examine power relations that exist in stories and in real life (Freire, 1970). Critical literacy also encourages critical thinking and social action.

Learning through activism also helps children to develop a sense of social justice, a sense of fairness and equity that begins with personal and community experience and extends globally and historically. (Cowhey, 2006, p. 103)

To move children from simply comprehending texts to critically analyzing those texts so they are moved to take relevant social action is truly culturally responsive teaching at its best.

### Critical Literacy vs. Reading Comprehension

Written text tends to fall into one of two broad categories: expository text, which communicates information, persuades, or explains; or narrative text, which tells a story. Understanding how text is organized helps readers construct meaning (Dickson, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1988).

While narrative text tells a story, expository text provides an explanation of facts and concepts. Its main purpose is to inform, persuade, or explain. Readers of expository text face the challenge of uncovering its organizational pattern and understanding the presentation, relationship, and hierarchy of ideas. Reading and understanding expository text involves more abstract thinking than does reading and understanding the typical narrative text. In expository text students need to compare and contrast ideas, recognize complex causality, synthesize information, and evaluate solutions for proposed problems.

As students learn about the structure of expository text they become more strategic in their reading, using prior

knowledge to set a purpose for reading, to identify what is important, to question and clarify, to make inferences, and to summarize. The student who is aware of the structural patterns in expository text can then begin to adopt a critical literacy lens and to question things that are taken for granted or assumed to be normal or natural in the world.

By moving beyond basic comprehension, critically literate students have mastered the ability to read and critique the messages in texts in order to better understand whose knowledge is being privileged.

### Impact of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy lends itself to promoting action for social justice (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). If we are going to have children read books and begin discussions on difficult issues of power, race, gender, and class, we want those young children to be empowered to help make a change. After reading the assigned text, the follow-up activity should be one that allows children to begin an action that gets them directly involved in important current issues. For example, our youngest readers can help collect items to donate, participate in clean ups and food drives, and partner with diverse groups, while third graders can begin letter writing campaigns to support a cause. This is also a great opportunity to involve families. The options are endless.

As we begin to prepare our young children to become thinkers and learners, we should not wait to have them start thinking critically when they get to high school. Young children are already capable of moving beyond what is in front of them on the page. Teachers of young children can guide their students through early literacy using critical literacy with the purpose of creating global thinkers who are comfortable dealing with issues and who are actively working toward change.

### The Critical Literacy Project

In the project described here, preservice teachers were introduced to critical literacy as a reading strategy designed to help children move beyond mere comprehension. They were given the opportunity to create critical literacy lessons and then demonstrate their lessons in front of their peers. After receiving feedback from their peers, the preservice teachers had the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions that explored their perceptions regarding the use of critical literacy. Our

intention was to introduce these preservice teachers to critical literacy and gain an insight into their experience and perceptions of critical literacy and its use in the primary classroom.

### Getting Started

At the start of a two and a half hour class on critical literacy, we created a PowerPoint presentation to introduce the students to the concept of critical literacy. Using McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2004) *Critical Literacy* text as the foundation for this project, the preservice teachers were introduced to the idea of critical literacy and were given examples demonstrating the importance of getting children to move beyond comprehension.

The preservice teachers were next asked to name their most memorable or favorite storybook as a child and to look for hidden messages and missing point of views in those stories. Upon examining some of their favorite children's stories, the preservice teachers began to see how children's books contain messages of power, race, gender, and class. This activity was undertaken as a way to encourage preservice teachers to recognize the need to make the curriculum more transparent and teach young children to take a critical stance towards literature.

Monica Gunning's (2004) *A Shelter in Our Car*, for example, was one such text used as the critical literacy lesson was carried out with the class. In this picture book, it is easy to enable students to see the messages within the text. This story tackles the difficult issues of homelessness and poverty, and briefly touches on immigration and death. The mood created by the illustrator is easily understood and it is clear whose point of view is not heard—that of the impoverished.

The preservice teachers were thus guided through a critical literacy lesson using strategies which encourage them to examine the author's and illustrator's perceived purpose and point of view while at the same time discussing how the story could differ if told from someone else's perspective. After the discussion and examination of the text, the preservice teachers were asked to brainstorm ideas that could connect this lesson to a social action project.

### The Critical Literacy Lesson

Following the in-class demonstration lesson, the preservice teachers worked in pairs and were asked to select a picture

book and create a critical literacy lesson that they could use in the primary classroom. The lessons were to follow McLaughlin & DeVoogd's (2004) critical literacy lesson framework which consists of four parts—engaging student's thinking, guiding student's thinking, extending student's thinking, and reflection.

Within the development of the lesson, the preservice teachers were required to use activities that support critical literacy. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) provide several examples of possible activities. A *setting switch* allows students to see how the story would be different if it took place in a different place or time, while a *gender switch* allows a class to examine the story if the main character was the opposite gender. *Question posing* allows the teacher to guide the students' thinking through questioning. The pre-service teachers were encouraged to use such activities in order to allow children to examine the issues from various perspectives and to choose the best fit for the selected text.

The preservice teachers, still operating in pairs, then presented their critical literacy lessons. After each lesson presentation, there was an opportunity for the larger group to provide feedback and reflection on the lesson. This overall activity gave the pre-service teachers exposure to a variety of children's picture books, examples of critical literacy lessons, and opportunities to examine and reflect on the use of critical literacy in lessons for young children.

### Students' Perceptions of Critical Literacy

After learning about and engaging in activities using critical literacy strategies, we were curious about our students' perceptions of critical literacy as a part of their classroom practice. A small study was conducted using a convenience sample. All of the participants were enrolled in "Diversity Perspectives in Early Childhood Education," a required course for all early childhood majors. In total there were 27 preservice teachers who participated in the study. Of those participants, one was male. All of the participants were White.

The study participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended questions:

1. Do you see critical literacy as benefiting students? If so, how?
2. What challenges do you see with implementing a critical literacy program?
3. What other thoughts do you have on critical literacy?

Once the questionnaires were collected, a qualitative content analysis of the students' responses was conducted with the intent of uncovering similar themes. The themes that emerged were divided into two categories that illuminated the benefits and challenges of using critical literacy in teaching young children.

### Benefits

In response to the first question, all preservice teachers found critical literacy to be beneficial. When the preservice teacher's responses were examined for common themes, there were three themes that emerged. First, the students believed that critical literacy enhances children's critical thinking and understanding of different perspectives. Second, they suggested that it allows children to be exposed to or aware of problems in their community. And third, the preservice teachers felt that critical literacy engages children in learning about different cultures and difficult issues such as homelessness or hunger.

### Challenges

In responding to the second question, while the students were able to see the benefits of critical literacy, they were also aware of some challenges. Three themes also emerged regarding this question. The first theme focused on their personal anxiety or discomfort in addressing "touchy subjects." A second related theme was a concern about potential parental opposition to the issues being addressed. The students did not want to offend anyone by overstepping their boundaries. The third theme focused on the practical issue that school district curricula, resources, and time would make engaging in critical literacy difficult.

### Other Thoughts

When the preservice teachers were also asked for "other thoughts" on critical literacy, seven preservice teachers failed to respond. Of the 20 who did respond, two expressed an interest, but also a concern, about the appropriateness of using critical literacy with young children. The remaining 18 responses were positive, indicating that the preservice teachers felt that critical literacy is important to and beneficial for young children.

### Conclusion

Our experiences in teaching preservice teachers about critical literacy have deepened our conviction that it should be an essential part of teacher education programs. The preservice teachers we worked with overwhelmingly recognized the need to move children beyond comprehension into thinking more critically about texts. They clearly felt that critical literacy is a valuable tool for use in the primary classroom, and that it is never too early to encourage young children to begin to think critically about the literature they are reading. As America's classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, it is crucial that we begin to equip preservice teachers to tackle the tough issues of diversity by examining other perspectives in the curriculum and encouraging students to promote social change.

Although our preservice teaching students recognized the importance of critical literacy, they also admitted feeling that there are barriers that stand in the way of utilizing critical literacy in the typical classroom. Recognizing and understanding these potential barriers will allow teacher education programs to seek solutions that will help preservice teachers develop effective strategies for overcoming any challenges that arise while including critical literacy as a part of the early childhood curriculum.

The first step in making critical literacy accessible to all students, however, must be teaching preservice teachers about the practice and showing them how to utilize it in developing effective critical literacy lessons appropriate to the classrooms in which they will teach.

### References

- Bean, T. W., & Harper, H. J. (2006). Exploring notions of freedom in young adults literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 50(2), 96-104.
- Bowers, C. A., & Flinders, D. J. (1990). *Responsive teaching: An ecological approach to classroom practices of language, culture, and thought*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Clark, L., & Whitney, E. (2009). Walking in their shoes: Using multiple-perspective texts as a bridge to critical literacy. *Reading Teacher*, 62(6), 530-534.
- Comber, B., & Simpson, A. (2001). *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cowhey, M. (2006). *Black ants and Buddhists: Thinking critically and teaching differently in the primary grades*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Dickson, S. V., Simmons, D., Kameenui, E. J. (1988). *What reading research tells us about children with diverse learning needs: Bases and basics*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Dozier, C., Johnston, P., & Rogers, R. (2006). *Critical literacy critical teaching: Tools for preparing responsive teachers*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fennimore, B. S. (2000). *Talk matters: Refocusing the language of public school*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gunning, M. (2004). *A shelter in our car*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Irvine, J. J. (2001). The critical elements of culturally responsive pedagogy: A synthesis of the research. In *Culturally responsive teaching: Lesson planning for elementary and middle grades*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Jones, S. (2006). *Girls, social class, and literacy: What teachers can do to make a difference*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lewison, M., Flint, A. S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts*, 79(5), 382-392.
- McLaughlin, M., & DeVoogd, G.L. (2004). *Critical literacy: Enhancing students' comprehension of text*. New York: Scholastic.
- Montgomery, W. (2001). Creating culturally responsive, inclusive classrooms. *The Council for Exceptional Children*, 33(4), 4-9.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2004). [http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass\\_2004\\_18](http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass_2004_18).
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). [http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/minoritytrends/tables/table\\_7\\_1](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/minoritytrends/tables/table_7_1).
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2007b). [http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/minoritytrends/figures/figure\\_9a](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/minoritytrends/figures/figure_9a).
- Silverstein, S. (1964). *The giving tree*. New York: