Empowering Adolescents Through Critical Literacy

This We Believe Characteristics

- High expectations for every member of the learning community
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning
- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity

By Karen D. Wood, Lina Soares, & Patricia Watson

One of the visions of This We Believe, position paper of the National Middle School Association (2003), is the need to provide a curriculum that is “relevant, challenging, integrative and exploratory” (p. 2). In such a curriculum, students are actively, personally engaged in learning, posing and answering questions that are important to them and that lead to a productive and satisfying life.

With the tenets of this position paper as our rationale, we introduce the concept of critical literacy (Bean & Moni, 2003) as a means of giving students a “voice” in those life influences that arise both inside and outside the classroom. We begin with a brief explanation of critical literacy as well as an historical perspective. Then we provide instructional practices to encourage students to become critically conscious, using critical literacy as a vehicle to empower them in all aspects of their lives. We conclude with the suggestion that educational policymakers, school officials, and classroom teachers re-envision their literacy programs to develop in students the ability to critically evaluate their ever changing world.

The Need to Develop Critical Literacy in Today’s Adolescents

Today’s young adolescents find themselves surrounded by a proliferation of technological advancements. As students find their way around malls, subway systems, and the Internet, while talking on cell phones, it is easy to see that many students have become acculturated to a wireless community allowing interaction with numerous information sources. Luke and Elkins (1998) referred to this explosion of communication technologies as “New Times.” Because adolescents now live in a postmodern world that easily connects their lives through electronic media, we might think that our students would feel a greater sense of stability; yet, these ever changing times can mean uncertain times for many of our students. The explosion of technological advances can sometimes interfere with adolescents’ sense of belonging and willingness to participate and express themselves freely (Mansfield, 2000). McDonald (1999) referred to young adolescents as “social actors” who mold their identities from their experiences. These “social actors” bring their popular

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culture into the school culture where the struggle between the two is inevitable (McLaren, 1988, p.168). As teachers, we know only too well that many of our "social actors" act out from having been silenced for too long.

Defining critical literacy
Critical literacy is a somewhat abstract concept, best defined and achieved by strategic instructional practices. The goal of critical literacy is to raise students' critical and social consciousness. Teachers who practice critical pedagogy provide a student-centered environment in which dialogue is encouraged. Dialogue is seen as a means of developing students' critical consciousness and as a vehicle in which students can begin to question their world. Discussions that focus on contentious, real-world issues are brought to the forefront and include race, gender, class, and politics (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001). Students are taught to examine multiple meanings in texts from multiple perspectives. Correspondingly, teachers of critical literacy encourage their students to question the construction of their information sources. These sources are never viewed as neutral (O'Neill, 1993), but rather as representations that serve particular authors' interests.

The history of critical literacy
Critical literacy evolved from the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory, which asserts that humans can change society through words and actions. Their view is that a more equitable world can be attained through “criticism of oppression and exploitation” (Kellner, 1989, p. 46). Critical social theorists view the world through a critical lens and see dominant groups of people as power holders who control social, political, and historical ideologies. Their goal is to emancipate all people from the oppressive forces of the power holders by raising man’s critical awareness of the systems at work in a dominant culture.

Similarly, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian adult literacy teacher, was concerned about the economic exploitation of the working people in his homeland. His Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970) was a significant articulation about how dialogue can be used to liberate people from oppression and suffering and how language can help transform society. Freire believed that social justice and libatory behaviors needed to be brought to the forefront of literacy instruction; and, thus, his work was instrumental in bringing critical social theory into the educational arena (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001). According to Freire, as students become more critically aware, they become more inclined to fight the oppressive systems in their world and are empowered to change their reality. The most logical place for students to encounter the social, political, and historical systems that dominate their world is the classroom. By engaging students in texts and dialogue that sharpen their critical consciousness, Freire (1970) believed that students would not only become critically informed, but also ethically committed to transform their society. For Freire, critical literacy was mostly about “reading the world.”

Today, critical literacy teachers tap into pop culture and media literacy at the same time researchers (Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood, 1999; Mraz, Heron, & Wood, 2003) emphasize popular culture, television, and newspaper advertisements as vehicles through which students can develop critical awareness by questioning, analyzing, and discussing multiple interpretations. In addition, the New London Group (1996) has supported the use of new critical literacies in the classroom as students of the 21st century become multimodal in their meaning-making due to the proliferation of information technology. Finally, teachers of critical literacy encourage their students to make responsible decisions to transform their personal lives so that they are better able to transform their world.

As middle school teachers, we have a role to play as well. We understand that the teaching of literacy is vital for students to become productive citizens; yet, we can do more than just simply teach literacy. We must step out of the box and adopt a literacy program that teaches our students to read, write,
listen, view, and speak in order to recognize and confront inequities in their lives. The next section uses the communication processes of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing as a means of developing students’ critical consciousness. The experiences and examples described come from middle school educators (and column co-authors) Lina Soares and Patricia Watson.

Critical Literacy Applied to the Classroom

Speaking

One of the ways to develop critical literacy in our students is questioning. Teachers can provide students with questions that allow them to voice their opinions about the meaning, interpretation, and perspectives of multiple kinds of texts. Such questioning fosters a higher order thinking that also develops social consciousness. Some suggested questions are listed in Figure 1 and have been adapted from Bean & Moni (2003) and McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2004).

While discussing part of Nelson Mandela’s (2001) memoir Long Walk to Freedom, students offered some astute responses to these questions. When asked to interpret Mandela’s view of his world, one student stated that “Mandela saw his world as a type of prison because he wasn’t free to go where he wanted and do what he wanted because of the color of his skin.” Another remarked that “it required courage to exist in his world, so his world produced some really great human beings whose lives made an impact on the entire world.” The question about what social function was served by the text also elicited solid responses. One young man indicated that “stories like this help to improve mankind.” Another said that “we must learn from the past in order to make the future better for everyone else.” It should be clear from these excerpts that when students are given the opportunity to discover the meaning embedded between the lines, they often engage in critical thinking, which not only allows them to examine the text, but also to examine the world in which they live.

Another way to use speaking as a means of promoting critical literacy is to allow students to engage in discussion strategies such as Socratic seminars, literature circles (Latendresse, 2004), improvisations, and oral debates as a means of expressing their opinions about their world, their experiences, and their interests. One of the co-authors, Ms. Watson, described a memorable Socratic seminar in her classroom surrounding the reading of a play based on The Diary of Anne Frank (2001). After reading the play, students wrote their own open-ended questions. Ms. Watson described the experience this way:

I was there merely to facilitate the discussion, and I must admit that many of their questions were far better than the ones in the text, or even the ones that I had written. One question pondered the issue of most- and least-favorite character in the play and why. Students couldn’t wait to answer that one, and although there was quite a bit of disagreement, the arguments they used to support their answers were really well thought out. All of the students felt free to express their views because these discussions are not about right and wrong answers, but rather about critical thinking.

It is essential that the teacher create a supportive environment that encourages critical thinking. Also, an assessment rubric with categories such as speaking, reasoning, listening, and conduct adds to the effectiveness of the seminar.

Writing

Critical literacy emphasizes the need to use language as a vehicle for social change.

Writing forces students to think; consequently, students should be afforded numerous opportunities to write about their thoughts and feelings. Some suggestions are listed below:

- Allow students to help select, research, and write about important issues that they find relevant: divorce, racism, family conflicts, political injustice.
- Encourage them to write letters to the editor.
- Use poetry as a tool to elicit students’ ideas on myriad topics. Poetry Slams, competitions that allow students to perform original poetry in front of an audience, are now a very popular tool for self-expression.
- Allow students to reflect on these topics of interest in journals. Be sure to use a variety of approaches to journal writing: double entry, personal, literature response, dialogue journal, writer’s journal, learning log.
- Use varied forms of creative writing to examine important issues: narratives, human interest stories, character sketches, plays, diaries, correspondences across time, song parodies, letters, interviews, and children’s books.

Reading

Critical literacy requires that students read and become knowledgeable about important issues before they can write and reflect about them. Providing both a print- and non-print-rich environment for students is essential if they are to effectively develop their voices.
• Novels are a great source of topics on all types of social issues. Here are a few powerful novels that come to mind:
  — A Girl Named Disaster by Nancy Farmer
  — Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick
  — The Giver by Lois Lowry
  — Sadako by Eleanor Coerr
  — Taking Sides by Gary Soto
  — The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros
  — Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo by Zlata Filipovic
  — The Pinballs by Betsy Byars

• Quality nonfiction books provide the foundation of essential learning.
  — Amistad: A Long Road to Freedom by Walter Dean Myers
  — Now Is Your Time! The African-American Struggle for Freedom by Walter Dean Myers
  — Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter by Adeline Yen Mah
  — The Luckiest Man Alive — Lou Gehrig by David Adler
  — I, Too, Sing America by Martha E. Rhynes

• Plays allow students to both read about and vicariously experience aspects of life.
  — The Diary of Anne Frank by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett
  — The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street by Rod Serling
  — The Kid Nobody Could Handle by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

• Poetry provides a new level of sophistication for students by introducing them to a style of writing that expresses thoughts powerfully while using words efficiently.
  — Words Like Freedom by Langston Hughes
  — I’m Nobody! Who Are You? by Emily Dickinson
  — The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost
  — Choices by Nikki Giovanni
  — Identity by Julio Noboa Polanco

• Technology helps students to key in on their interests and aspects of popular culture.
  — Use video games as a springboard for discussions of societal themes and controversies.
  — Investigate some of the more acceptable lyrics of students’ favorite music.

Suggested Literature for Empowering Adolescents


Viewing
Viewing is often given minimal attention in the classroom, and yet students and adults spend much of their time viewing. Another component of critical literacy, therefore, is teaching students the fundamentals of critical viewing.

Films are powerful educational tools. Instead of allowing students to simply watch a movie after reading the literary work, teachers should help them analyze and reflect on aspects of the visual text, the content of the film, and the context of the film. For example, in one teacher’s classroom the students viewed the film Sounder and compared the film and the text versions. Both teacher and students analyzed the film’s use of color, aspects of the setting, the
camera angles, the dialogue, and the techniques used in the direction of a particular scene. Then the teacher used some of the questions listed above under the “speaking” section of this article to determine who constructs the text and how that is accomplished, the social function served by the visual text, and an examination of the silent voices within the visual text.

Viewing is not limited to films, however. Similar critical literacy skills can be developed by analyzing and reflecting on photographs, political cartoons, comic strips, dramatic presentations, periodicals, multimedia presentations, advertisements, posters, television, and an assortment of artistic renderings. Critical literacy, when applied to the communication process of viewing, involves an understanding of the author’s techniques, the viewer’s reactions, and social issues raised by visual texts.

**Listening**

If viewing is given minimal attention in the classroom, listening is given even less.

Students must learn to become astute listeners, and teachers have a responsibility to teach them how to listen more effectively. Ms. Soares and Ms. Watson recommend the following strategies for developing students’ abilities to listen with a critical ear:

- **Provide students with opportunities to listen to each other through such activities as discussion, seminars, and debates.**
- **Let students listen to portions of a book on tape and discuss some of the major issues contained therein.**
- **Provide students with taped recordings of famous or not-so-famous speeches followed by a discussion of the major themes, format, and effectiveness of the speech.**
- **Assign students to listen to segments of National Public Radio (NPR), and design lessons that will elicit discussions and writing activities based on the issues.**

**References**


