



Critical Literacy and Children's Identity Development

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'What should we teach to our children?' is the most important and frequently asked question in the education field. Concerning this question, teachers and educators continually discussed and contemplated on how to teach children and how to design educational setting for children to work together to construct their positive identities in our society and to experience learning, which helps them to develop their 'desirable selves' (Bean & Moni, 2003). This study investigates how we could expose children to the context, where they can participate in real-life situations, and encourage them to think critically about the world they are situated in. For this purpose, critical literacy is addressed as a tool for teaching and learning, which allow us to critique and redirect our society to a better place. Through the review of the literature, critical curriculum and conversation are also highlighted to teach children to develop positive identities. Finally, the researchers conclude that we need to create respectful climates of learning environments, where students can develop understandings of complex issues from different perspectives.

Keywords: Critical literacy; Literacy education; Identity development

Bean and Moni (2003) described how literature is taught and discussed in the classrooms and argued that critical literacy allows people to question the existing worldviews. According to them, students can develop alternative perspectives while they are reading from different positions and explore the situations. Since thinking and engaging are two ways of participating in the educational and social context, helping children think critically and act on social issues will lead them to promote their engagement with critical social problems and develop their positive identities. Bean and Moni (2003) demonstrated how students engaged in 'reader positioning' while participating in reading activities and described how teachers adopt a critical literacy discussion framework in their classrooms. They argued for the relationship between critical literacy and identity development and insisted that classroom transformation through critical literacy activities are vital for children's positive identity construction.

In addition, Leland and Harste (2000) argued that reading instructions are to assist students to understand diverse histories, backgrounds, and social experiences so that they can view the world in new perspectives. Leland and Harste also noted that encouraging children to think critically is crucial in reading activities since meaning-making is a center of the reading process. According to

them, teachers should position their children into the situation by helping them to concentrate on the text.

From Bakhtin's perspective, the social world is explained as a composition of the multiple voices of multiple views. In this view, children's identities are constructed in multiple contexts of multiple voices, and literacy education develops not only learners' linguistic fluencies but also multiple and sophisticated identities in the society (Johnson, 2004). Thus, students can compare their lives to the characters in the novel and literacy activities raise dynamic tensions in the conversation between them (Bean & Moni, 2003).

Exposing children to critical issues, such as marginalization, social inequality, and discrimination will lead them to develop the ability of critical thinking and construct a positive identity. Also, critical literature, textbooks, and school context will offer the children the power to change the social injustice. This research investigates the relationship between critical literacy and children's identity development and discusses how to apply critical literacy theory to the education field, communities, and school context.

What is Critical Literacy?

Freire (1970) defined critical literacy as an attitude toward texts and discourses that questions the social, political, and economic conditions of those texts (Beck, 2005). According to theorists, critical literacy works to produce the knowledge and skills that allow people to act as social agents. That is, critical literacy leads individuals to recognize and confront unjust social power (Luke, 2018).

Critical literacy calls for creating learning and teaching environments, where students and teachers can develop critical thinking and continue to struggle to create a better society. Thus, in critical literacy, discussions, and dialogues are connected to critical conversations. According to Morris (2011), critical literacy raises complex issues that have misdirected our society in the past and examines education, social responsibility, power distribution, citizenship, and democracy; all issues involve rigorous and ongoing critique.

Freire's (2018) notion of 'pedagogy of the oppressed' reveals power relationships in the society and allows people to take actions against social injustice. According to Vasquez (2001), teachers need to construct a critical curriculum, which includes social justice issues such as race, class, gender, and fairness. Through critical literacy activities, teachers and students can be exposed to the problems of inequity in the classroom and society. Also, they can unfold the social injustice and unequal power distribution through classroom conversations and critical questions.

Moreover, critical literacy generates the issue of the power relationship between mainstream and marginalized discourses. Regarding power relationship, Stein (2001) posited that a pedagogy of reappropriation could contribute towards building a critical reflection in the classrooms, where all participants share and re-evaluate the relationship between their histories and their cultural forms.

What should be considered in Critical Literacy?

Power Relationship

Power and empowerment have existed largely in societies (Freire, 2018). Critical Literacy theorists discuss the political aspects of literacy education about unequal power distribution in social contexts. They argue that some schooling may reinforce persistent inequalities in our society and that critical literacy education can empower children to overcome such social oppression. In their perspective, critical literacy education reveals the social norms, which have allowed the mainstream to have a dominant position over the marginalized group (Luke, 2018; Morris, 2011; Stein, 2001).

Morris (2011) noted that critical literacy encourages children and teachers to investigate power relationships. According to him, schools reproduced the unequal distribution of wealth and power in modern societies. Wallace (2001) also discussed that critical literacy is concerning power relations, which are situated in the real world and educational context. She highlighted the perspective of some Critical Literacy theorists, who posit that our world systematically works for the individuals who have social and political power. According to them, this unequal power distribution marginalizes the other group at the same time (Wallace, 2001).

Critical Reading

Critical reading is a crucial aspect of critical literacy. Critical reading deals with controversial issues in the texts and asks students to look for hidden meanings in them (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001). Bean and Moni (2003) argued that critical literacy helps the reader to explore identity construction in the novel and engage in critical discourse analysis, which enables the children to examine the meaning behind the text.

According to Wallace (2001), discussion with the texts is a part of the reading process, and critical reading and discussion enable students to be aware of the ideologies behind the texts. For example, Stein (2001) noticed that the students in his project perceived the ideological and political goals of some African folk tales, which had been served for groups of different interests in the South African history. He also noted that students became able to see the power relationship in the past and society while critically reading and analyzing the texts with a critical perspective.

Reading as Social Practice / Classroom Discussion (Conversation)

In Critical Literacy theorists' perspective, reading is a social practice, and classroom discussions during and after sharing books promote critical thinking. In critical literacy, reading is a cultural practice since critical reading encourages children to have questions such as "Whose story is this?" and "Who benefits from this story?". While children engage in reading as a social practice, they can interrogate the social systems and power relationships, which are embedded in social contexts (C. Leland, J. Harste, A. Ociepka, M. Lewison, & V. Vasquez, 1999). According to Morris (2011), classroom discussions and dialogues must be directed to critical conversations. Leland, Harste, and Shockley (2007) questioned privilege, equity, and shared knowledge in critical literacy and conducted a study, in which they conceptualized literacy as a social practice. In summarizing their research, they posited that all participants, including teachers, were learners in those social practices, and that knowledge is socially constructed.

Furthermore, Leland et al. (1999) argued that critical literacy involves critical thinking. This perspective also entails social action. To observe the movement toward social action during reading critical books, they carried out a classroom study, in which the teacher read aloud a critical book, and the third and fourth graders listened to it. In this process, the researchers observed that the children positioned themselves into the oppressed group. Moreover, the researchers noticed that the children were questioning the power structure in the school. Through this study, they highlighted the importance of conversations in the process of reading critical books and argued for the critical talks between the teacher and their students. They also claimed that while teachers had specific discussions with the children on topics, they could explore and develop a new curriculum.

To observe the potential of discussion and the engagements of students in critical conversations, Heffernan and Lewison (2003) conducted a study. They implemented classroom activities, which stimulated critical talk during literature circles and morning meetings, where kids analyzed literary texts, news articles, and school procedures. In this process, Heffernan and Lewison

observed that the children act as “text participants” and became to understand the issues of power while sharing and discovering cultural themes and social issues. Heffernan and Lewison concluded that schools are the places, where children can detect and critique the problems around them and develop their abilities to think critically through critical conversations.

In addition, Applebee (1997) posited that classroom conversations have educational power, so instruction must be designed to help students enter the curricular discussion. According to him, teachers generate scaffolding, reciprocal teaching, apprenticeship, and mentoring, and students learn the rules of discourse and experience the larger communities while participating in a classroom conversation. His claim is based on the constructivists' perspective, which explains that knowledge is constructed while learners are engaged in a meaning-making process. Concerning the role of teachers in conversations, Applebee also suggested that conversation facilitating by others will help students develop knowledge skills.

Educational Approach

Critical Books

Critical Literacy theorists emphasize the importance of critical books to educators (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999). The vital issues embedded in the critical books allow children to think and deal with the problems critically. As the story unfolds, children are exposed to the situation and confront the problematic issues in the story. For example, *The Circuit* deals with many critical issues such as poverty, educational inequity, injustice in workplaces, language marginalization, and so on. Similarly, *A Day's Work* by Eve Bunting describes unequal social systems and allows children to think about problematic issues such as language marginalization, poverty, discrimination of immigrant people, and social hierarchy system.

Critical books concern social issues and power. *Piggy Book* by Anthony Browne reveals patriarchy and family injustice, which are embedded in social norms. While reading critical books, children will be able to ask questions about what matters our society problematic. Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, and Vasquez (1999) noted that critical literacy “focuses on building students' awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead” (p.70). According to Leland et al. (1999), critical books explore the complex social problems of dominant systems that operate in our society and show how people can begin to act on critical social issues.

Curriculum

Critical curricula can be used for critical conversations. One important aspect of the critical curriculum is that it facilitates children's deep understanding of social justice and power issues. In relation with critical curricula, Vasquez (2001) proposed some suggestions that could be considered in constructing a critical curriculum: generating issues for critical inquiry, demonstrating the construction of a more socially equitable classroom, and expanding the culture's conversation.

Vasquez's (2001) study also demonstrated the issues of critical literacy and questioned how we were written in the world and how we could re-write ourselves in society. Also, they discussed how inequitable situations arose and were maintained.

According to Lankshear (1994), critical literacy involves some characterization, such as having a critical view of literacy, texts, and social contexts (Wallace, 2001). All in all, to help children develop a critical perspective, creating critical curriculum should be implemented.

Classroom

Critical Literacy theory examines classroom practices about social justice, power, and control. Dyson (2001) claimed that children tend to play in social circles, where they are marked by their gender, race, and social class. In a classroom setting, children are exposed to conversations which involve critical awareness.

Critical literacy classrooms emphasize students' dialogues as tools to reflect on critical issues and construct meanings from the texts (Beck, 2005). In this perspective, all class members play an active role in the knowledge construction of understanding social contexts. Wallace (2001) stated that critical literacy requires critical pedagogy, and the classrooms should have each child playing an active role.

Bean and Moni (2003) discussed identity construction through the experience and interpretation of social practice and argued that discussions in critical literacy activities change relationships between teacher and students. Moreover, children generate crucial conversations about the text while participating in activities, such as drama activities and role-playing, where they can position themselves in a problematic situation and challenge the social norms from a different perspective (Bean & Moni, 2003).

Educational Intervention (Teacher Interruption)

Stein (2001) emphasized the importance of an educational intervention and claimed that it helps students nurture the ability to think critically. Concerning educational intervention in critical reading, the teacher's role should be stressed as motivating children's critical thinking. Teachers participate in students' critical reading processes while they share the issues in the texts with students. The goal of teachers' interruption in children's reading process is to help them to be able to think critically from a different position and examine what the story says and how the texts position them (Leland & Harste, 2000). In addition to challenging students' reading process, teachers also should consider students' motivation in critical reading. When teachers try to meet students' basic psychological needs, which are autonomy, competence, and relatedness, students' intrinsic motivation in critical reading would increase and lead to desirable learning outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Therefore, teachers should offer enough choices in text and provide an adequate level of the critical reading task.

About the teacher's role in critical literacy education, Wallace (2001) noted that teachers are the ones who have the most significant power in the classrooms. She said that the teacher could facilitate or frustrate the children's critical literacy development and argued for the importance of the teacher's role to have students participate in the classroom communication equally. According to her, teachers have a dual role as the principal and the author while they co-participate in a critical inquiry, which develops crucial negotiation in the classroom.

Conclusion

Traditionally, identity is defined as an image of a bounded self of agency and autonomy (Alvermann, 2001, p.678). However, the postmodern concept of identity is complex and multifaceted. Multi-contexts strongly influence identity development, and critical literacy enables students to participate in their identity development through the deconstruction of texts and discussions, which allows them to confront and connect to various texts (Bean & Moni, 2003).

Critical literacy concerns injustices in social systems, where people from racially, socially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds are oppressed and marginalized. As

Wallace (2001) noted, critical literacy is a practice which finds its educational contexts. Consequently, critical literacy stresses curriculum development and creation of classroom climates where critical conversation and discussion are possible.

Stein (2001) claimed that educational intervention is essential in critical literacy. He used the term of reappropriation and transformation to support his idea and argued that educational intervention attempts to transform the previously marginalized or invisible cultures into institutional spaces. As Stein noted, it is essential to redefine ourselves as individuals who take responsibilities for the past, future, and our societies.

Throughout history, dehumanization, distortion, and inequality have been shaped through textbooks and children's literature, and the silence and exclusive curriculum caused these social injustices. Social injustice has been passed down from generation to generation, and it is crucial for us to know that deliberately devised textbooks and implicitly and explicitly constructed hidden curricula played a significant role in forming segregation and distorted images of our society. Silence, together with hidden curricula and social discourse around power, nation, race, and social control, avoided confronting the social injustice and negatively influenced the individuals' identity formations.

However, our children of this generation are ready to tackle issues of social injustice, which the past has been silent on, and curricula, textbooks, and children's literatures encourage them to struggle for social reformation and overcome frustration. As Kohl (2014) noted, children need to identify themselves as activists, who reject unfairness and admit justice.

In conclusion, we need to create respectful climates of learning environments in which teachers and students can develop understandings of complex issues. To help children learn different perspectives, teachers should create critical curricula and an environment where children can engage in critical conversations. Critical literacy, indeed, will guide teachers and students to develop their knowledge and the ability to think critically. Also, critical literacy will provide both teachers and students with the powerful tool of adequate education, which will bridge children to their society by helping them develop the ability to question social problems and meet the social needs. In other words, critical literacy will play an essential role in helping students and teachers have a "critical hope" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

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