

CRITICAL LITERACY: ENLARGING THE SPACE OF THE POSSIBLE

There are several ways to think about the teacher's role in the teaching of reading. One important goal is to help children understand how texts work, including such elements as story structure and how sounds and symbols relate. Another goal in the teaching of reading is to help children understand that texts are open to a variety of readings given different histories, backgrounds, and experiences. Meaning making is central to the reading process. A third goal is to make sure that children experience firsthand how useful texts are in helping us see the world in a new light and accomplish work in a more efficient and effective manner. A goal that generally receives much less attention focuses on encouraging children to think critically about what they read—to pay attention to what a particular text is doing to them, how it is positioning them, and whose interests are being served by how the text is written.

A critical stance makes us aware that all texts are told from a particular point of view and are undeniably colored by this perspective. Whether we are reading a piece that is admittedly fictional or one that is said to be nonfiction, we need to be conscious of the assumptions that are embedded in the text.

A news story is a good example. Although it ostensibly presents factual material, an author's tone and choice of words can make a big difference. Our local newspaper, *The Indianapolis Star*, often sets up an image of strife and failure when it refers to the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS). Thus, a news story about improved test scores still manages to deliver a negative image

with terms like “beleaguered IPS” and “embattled IPS.” Reading from a critical perspective allows us to see this as a power issue. The owners of the newspaper have the power to hire writers who will “spin” stories to support their interests (e.g., vouchers and privatized education) and political positions. Since all texts represent particular cultural positions and discourses, being critically literate means being aware of how texts (and how we are taught to read them) construct us as particular kinds of literate beings. To be critically literate is to be able to decide for ourselves how we wish to be positioned in the world.

A curriculum built on critical literacy is one that highlights diversity and difference while calling attention to how we are constructed as literate beings. One theoretical model that offers a useful framework for thinking about critical literacy is Luke and Freebody's model of reading as social practice (1997). According to this model, reading is best understood as a non-neutral form of cultural practice—one that positions readers in certain ways and obscures as much as it illuminates. Luke and Freebody argue that in preparing readers for the 21st century, teachers need to help children develop their resources in several areas: 1) as code breakers, 2) as text participants, 3) as text users, and 4) as text critics (p. 214).

Each resource area has its own set of issues. Approaching reading as a set of coding practices leads to an emphasis on analyzing the different sounds, marks, and conventions. Readers' efforts are focused on figuring out how texts work so that they can “crack” them. Seeing reading as a set

Christine H. Leland

Associate Professor,
Indiana University-
Purdue University
at Indianapolis
(IUPUI)



Jerome C. Harste

Professor, Indiana
University,
Bloomington



Paying attention to critical practices means that a reader becomes consciously aware of how texts position people and represent some voices while silencing others.

of text-meaning practices leads to an emphasis on discovering how the ideas represented in a text string together and how cultural resources might help in the construction of different interpretations. An approach to reading built on pragmatic practices involves developing one's resources as a text user and leads to questions about options and alternatives for the here-and-now use of text, as well as predictions about how others will use it. Finally, paying attention to critical practices means that a reader becomes consciously aware of how texts position people and represent some voices while silencing others.

Working from Luke and Freebody's model, we want to make the parallel argument that teaching is another non-neutral form of cultural practice. As was the case with reading, different approaches to teaching represent cultural positions and ideologies as well. If we conceptualize teaching as a set of coding practices, the main goal is the transmission of knowledge and techniques. Inherent in this view is the belief that teachers simply tell or show students what to do. Prescriptive teaching manuals and "teacher-proof" materials are examples of resources that promise to help "crack the code" of teaching. The focus is on covering content without necessarily helping students to understand it. Approaching teaching as a set of meaning practices shifts the goal from rote learning to the development of individuals who are able to use cultural as well as text-based resources to generate a number of possible meanings. A view of teaching as pragmatic practices assigns top priority to the goal of developing an understanding of what can be accomplished in the real world. This view involves helping teachers see themselves as people who can change the school setting and create a different reality for their students. Finally, reimagining teaching as a set of critical practices means that teachers are able to help children critique and outgrow the systems in which they live and work. They

become individuals who are motivated to interrogate their personal assumptions as well as those that are embedded in the educational and larger social systems in which they operate.

During the past two years, we have been investigating ways to support teachers in taking a more critical approach. Part of this work has focused on identifying children's books that are particularly useful for starting and sustaining critical conversations in classrooms. We have documented the conversations that follow the reading of these books to investigate how teachers and children become new literate beings as a result of having participated in these conversations. These books build awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead. The criteria we developed for selecting these books (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999) include the following characteristics:

- They don't make difference invisible, but rather explore what differences *make a difference*;
- They enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized—we call them "the indignant ones";
- They make visible the social systems that attempt to maintain economic inequities;
- They show how people can begin to take action on important social issues;
- They explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people;
- They help us question why certain groups are positioned as "others."

Said differently, some books in the critical category focus more on historical issues like slavery or the industrial revolution and show how large groups of people were marginalized and stripped of their

human rights. Others are more contemporary in nature and encourage readers to interrogate current practices that are generally accepted as “what we have always done.” For example, if a present-day high school uses the theme of “slave day” to raise money for student activities, is it okay because “it’s traditional,” or do we need to talk about how this practice might be seen as sustaining the degrading treatment of African Americans? Some books in this category focus on the issue of “otherness” and how our perceptions of “others” change after we get to know them better. “Others” can be people of different racial or social groups; they can be elderly or handicapped or sick; or they can be from another part of the country or the world. Engaging children in conversations about the pernicious effects of “otherness” can help them begin to see and understand the world in new ways. Like real life, many critical books do not have simplistic happy endings. The authors invite conversation by refraining from tying up their stories in neat little packages. Readers are expected to draw their own conclusions about what will happen next.

If we believe that democracy is a plan for human development that reflects a shared vision of “how things could be” (Fu & Stremmel, 1999, p. 5), then conversations like these are too important for children to miss. The notion of change is integral to this conception of democracy—there is no fixed standard, but an evolving set of fluid relationships among people over time. In some ways, this view of democracy is complex and messy. It doesn’t lend itself to tidy categorization, and it’s hard to manage. This view of democracy resonates with Davis and Sumara’s (1999) suggestion that society as we know it is in the midst of a transformation regarding how we understand and describe the world. They argue that we are moving *away from* statistical analysis, causal logic, and a reductionist focus on linear relationships *toward* a realization that

the universe is better described by complexity theory. According to this world view, complex systems (like living organisms) cannot be understood by examining their separate parts; the parts are as complex as the whole.

Davis and Sumara (1999) introduce the terms *simplicity* and *complicity*. They describe a simplex system as one that is dependent on initial conditions and suggest that in these systems, “the space of the possible is fixed” (p. 23). By contrast, in complicity theory, interactions between and within the systems have the capacity to bring about “an opening of new possibilities, a continuous enlargement of the space of the possible” (p. 23). While they offer evolution and cognition as examples of complicit systems, we offer a critical approach to teaching as an example.

As teachers, we need to decide whether we want to maintain schooling as a simplex system or start reconceptualizing it as a complicit system where interactions among the participants have the capacity to bring about change and open up new spaces. Complicity also presumes that we are somehow implicated as an accessory, and no one is totally innocent of his or her actions. When teachers argue that they are “neutral” and don’t want to bring up any ethical or moral issues in their classrooms, what they’re really doing is supporting the status quo (Freire, 1971). “For us, complicity compels acknowledgement by those who dwell in the sacrosanct, unquestioned center that they too are thoroughly implicated in the unfolding of our cultural world—with all its inequities, injustices, and scabrous edges” (Davis & Sumara, 1999, p. 28). In other words, we all have our fingers in the cookie jar whether we want to admit it or not.

The realization of complicity relieves our feelings of guilt regarding the influence of our own values and agendas on our curricula. While we used to believe that our role as researchers was simply to observe

Engaging children in conversations about the pernicious effects of “otherness” can help them begin to see and understand the world in new ways.

Teachers who reimagine teaching as a set of critical practices disrupt the normative patterns of society and open up spaces for new voices to be heard.

and never to change anything, complicity reminds us that we “are inevitably engaged in transformation: each and every act, however benignly conceived, seeps beyond its intent as it enlarges the space of the possible. We are always already participating in culture making” (Davis & Sumara, 1999, p. 31).

When teachers share critical texts with children and talk with them about the issues raised by these books, they become deeply involved in the process of culture making. They “interrupt” (Davis & Sumara, in press) current views regarding reading instruction and the topics of conversation that are appropriate for children (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999). Teachers who reimagine teaching as a set of critical practices disrupt the normative patterns of society and open up spaces for new voices to be heard. Using selected children’s literature is one way to begin critical conversations; they could also begin with newspaper articles, interviews with community members, or events in our schools. The authors who have written from a classroom perspective in this issue of *Primary Voices K-6* have all used their teaching to disrupt the usual classroom status quo. They provide compelling evidence that teachers with a critical perspective can change the patterns of interaction in classrooms and enlarge the space of the possible. Since they are involved in complicitous research, they are not concerned primarily with describing or analyzing what is, but with finding out how what they are doing has affected the lives and situations of others. This kind of educational research is not simply research that takes place in educational settings; this kind of educational research is “research that seeks to educate” and affect the way things are (Davis & Sumara, 1999, pp. 31–32).

Whitney Dotson, one of our recently graduated interns, is a new urban teacher who is actively seeking to enlarge the space

of the possible. When her third graders were upset because the home of one student’s grandmother had been condemned by the Board of Health and was scheduled for demolition, she urged them to take action by writing letters to the Board of Health. A sampling of these letters documents the new voices these children found while writing (see Figure 1).

Instead of being positioned as helpless victims, they are positioning themselves as social activists who are challenging the status quo and asking for change. They are starting to understand the political capital that is inherent in language. Whitney is helping them (and herself) to understand that this capital is there for the taking. We would argue that this is exactly what education should be doing—especially for the teachers and children of “beleaguered” public schools everywhere.

References

- Davis, B., & Sumara, D. (in press). Curriculum forms: On the assumed shapes of knowing and knowledge. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*.
- Davis, B., & Sumara, D. (1999). Another queer theory: Reading complexity theory as a moral and ethical imperative. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 15 (2), 19–38.
- Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seaview.
- Fu, V., & Stremmel, A. (1999). *Affirming diversity through democratic conversations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Leland, C., & Harste, J. (1999). “Is this appropriate for children?": Books that bring realistic social issues into the classroom. *Practically Primary*, 4(3), 4–6.
- Leland, C., Harste, J., Ociepka, A., Lewison, M., & Vasquez, V. (1999). Exploring critical literacy: You can hear a pin drop. *Language Arts*, 77, 70–77.
- Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1997). Shaping the social practices of reading. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke, & P. Freebody (Eds.), *Constructing critical literacies* (pp. 185–225). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.

<p style="text-align: right;">Oct 5, 1999</p> <p>Dear Bord of Health please please do not take peoples homes away from them if you do they will not have any where to go to. No where to sleep How would you like live on the streets and freete in the winter that is how they are.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Your friend Betty</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">Oct 5, 1999</p> <p>Dear Board of Health,</p> <p>Do not take peoples house away just because they dont Keep it really nice licke you ant it. I dont licke it and when you do it to old people I really get mad.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Cordaryl</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">Oct 5, 1999</p> <p>Dear Board of Health,</p> <p>Please stop taking houses away from people I now that they are sad they are hungry and t they want to eat and they need a please to sleep. They have no money to by a home. Where are they going to live at you give the people 4 chars to clean there homes you need to giv them a week or two to clean there home.</p>
--	--	---

Figure 1. Letters to the Board of Health