# Little Red Riding Hood Goes to College: Inviting the Language of Critique in Teacher Education

By Jerome C. Harste, Christine H. Leland and Cynthia Jackson, Indiana University

Critical literacy is about language and power, language and access, diversity, and redesign (Janks, 2001). Critical literacy calls attention to the many ways that language is used to wield power and maintain systems of domination. In this context, a critical reader is aware of the work that language does as well as how it does it. Teachers can support children in becoming critical readers by developing their analytical abilities as well as by providing access and competency in the languages of power. Not only do linguistic and cultural diversity have to be viewed as potential strengths rather than problems, but teachers also need to be able to redesign instruction for the purpose of envisioning more just and equitable social futures.

"In elementary classrooms, teachers work on at least three fronts: they work with children's existing abilities for critical analysis; they examine examples of writing, drawing, cartoon, film, etc. that take a critical stance; and they offer children new discursive resources" (Comber, 2001, p.1). By discursive resources, Comber means linguistic and cognitive practices that help them question how texts work to represent specific interests. This paper reports findings from a longitudinal project that investigated the role a teacher education program can play in helping prospective teachers develop the discursive resources that Comber described. The underlying assumption that guided the study was the belief that future teachers need to develop these discursive resources for themselves before they can teach them to others.

During the past six years, we have attempted to make our teacher education program more critical. Specifically, we have become increasingly explicit about how language does the work of marginalizing some groups while empowering others. We have also looked more openly at our own privilege, become much more aware of the messages being transmitted by our society's traditional texts (i.e., *Little Red Riding Hood),* and have used read aloud times in our college classroom and in the public schools in which we place students to open up space for critical conversations. We had many advantages in pursuing this goal including the following: 1) a program that was entirely field-based, 2) an opportunity to work with three different cohorts of students (usually around 30 at a time) over a period of two years, and 3) the fact that we were responsible for all of our students' professional methods coursework and field experiences, not just the literacy components.

Our work with three cohorts taught us that the more explicitly we front-loaded the curriculum with matters of critical literacy, the more students demonstrated the ability to take on a critical perspective in their writing. This finding is as true for Cohort 3 as it was for Cohorts 1 and 2 (Leland, Harste & Youssef, 1997; Leland, Harste, Jackson & Youssef 2001). Study 1 compares a sample of Cohort 3 journal entries to equivalent samples from the earlier two cohorts. Study 2 takes an in-depth look at how students demonstrated their understanding of some specific dimensions of critical literacy that have been identified in the literature. Together these studies suggest that students became more critical as we worked through the three cohorts. However, the studies also show that we still have a long way to go in terms of addressing all of the dimensions of critical literacy identified in the literature.

## Study One

*Overview*

An ongoing assignment for the students in all three cohorts was to keep a reflective journal and make two weekly entries. Students in Cohort 3 were also asked to look through their journals at the end of each semester and write what we called a "summative" entry that specifically described how they saw themselves addressing critical literacy in their journal over the course of that semester.

*Data Analysis*

To study the degree to which students in Cohort 3 were taking on a critical perspective, we analyzed their journal entries using Van Manen's (1977) evaluative framework, the same framework we had used to analyze entries from Cohorts 1 and 2 (Leland, Harste & Youssef, 1997; Leland, Harste, Jackson & Youssef 2001). This framework identifies three levels of reflection: technical (what can be thought of as managerial), interpretive (which involves making practical choices based on the contextual setting), and moral (which focuses on the worth of knowledge and "the social conditions necessary for raising the questions of worthwhileness in the first place" [Van Manen, 1977, p.227]). At this level, teachers look critically at the ethical basis for what happens in the classroom and judge educational goals, experiences and activities against the criteria of justice and equity. We used Van Manen's third level as the criterion for selecting critical entries. Critical thought units were identified as sections of text consisting of one or more sentences that addressed a topic at this level. While this framework has been used extensively in the literature on teacher education (e. g. Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Pultorak, 1993), we are not aware of other studies that ignored the first two levels and focused only on the third category (moral or critical). We hypothesized that the frequency of journal entries raising critical issues would give us some indication of how dominant a critical literacy perspective had become in our students' thinking.

To compare Cohort 3 data to data we had collected and analyzed when we did studies of Cohorts 1 and 2, we randomly selected and studied 40 entries; specifically, the "summative" journal entries of 10 students across 4 semesters. Because summative journal entries were written reflectively, students often referred to previous entries in their journals, some of which were responses to professional readings. All entries reported here were self-selected by students when they were asked to identify journal entries that reflected evidence of their personal growth over the semester. These 40 samples were analyzed according to Van Manen's framework. As with our previous studies, we identified journal entries which met Van Manen's criteria of "moral" (what we called "critical") and then categorized them in terms of whether they dealt with issues of equity and justice as related to <u>instruction</u>, the more general <u>culture of schooling</u>, or larger <u>social forces</u>. Inter-rater reliability across raters was .88 with 100 percent agreement after discussion.

Figure 1 shows these data for Cohort 3 across four semesters. In this case there was a relatively stable number of critical comments made by students across the semesters: 40 in semester 1, 30 in semester 2, 34 in semester 3, and 40 in semester 4. When we categorized Cohort 3's critical entries by content, we found that the greatest concentration during the first semester focused on instruction and how it could be made more equitable. During semesters 3 and 4, one half or more of the entries judged to be critical addressed topics relating to more general curricular structures (what we called the

culture of schooling) and how these might be made more equitable. Across all semesters there were relatively fewer entries that dealt with social forces not clearly tied to education.

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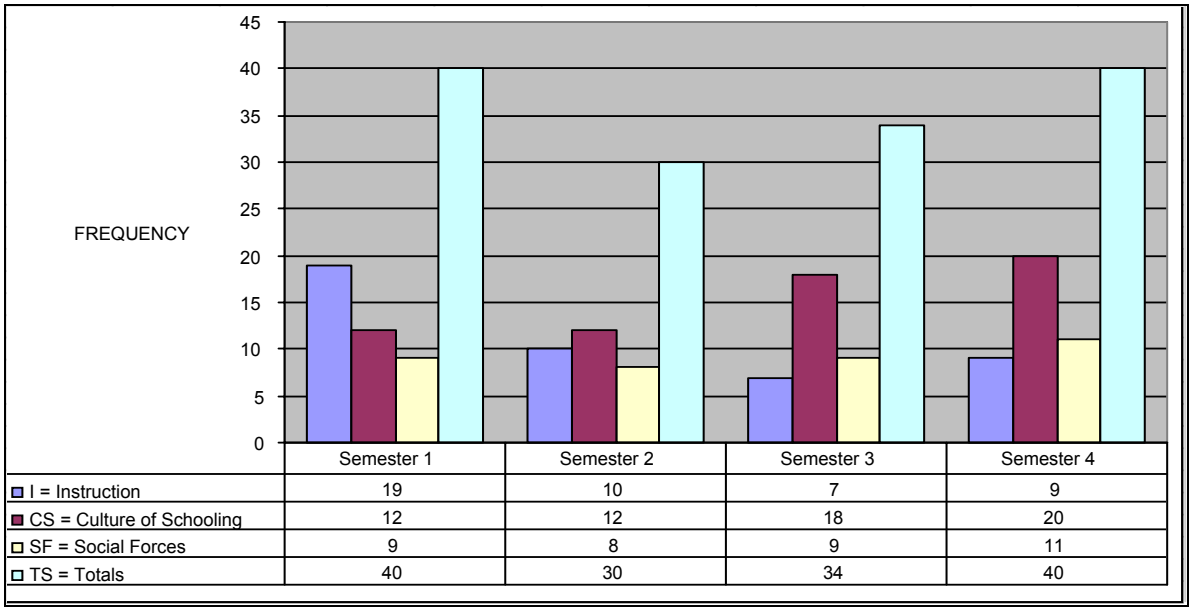


**FIGURE 1**

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In terms of total numbers in all three categories, Figure 2 documents a marked increase over six years. While the 40 samples generated by students in Cohort 3 yielded a total of 144 critical comments, the 40 samples generated by students in Cohorts 1 and 2 yielded 72 and 25 occurrences respectively. The number of critical entries increased by close to three times between Cohorts 1 and 2 and doubled between Cohorts 2 and 3. The amount of critical entries for Cohort 3 is more than five times the amount for Cohort 1. One explanation for such significant changes, which we discuss below, is that we increasingly front-loaded our curriculum with issues of language and power, the underlying systems of meaning that operate in society and awareness of the various ways that each of us has consciously or unconsciously helped to perpetuate social injustice. While no precise cause and effect relationship can be established, the distribution of reflective comments across categories suggests that Cohort 3 students came to understand critical literacy in a quite different way than did previous cohorts.

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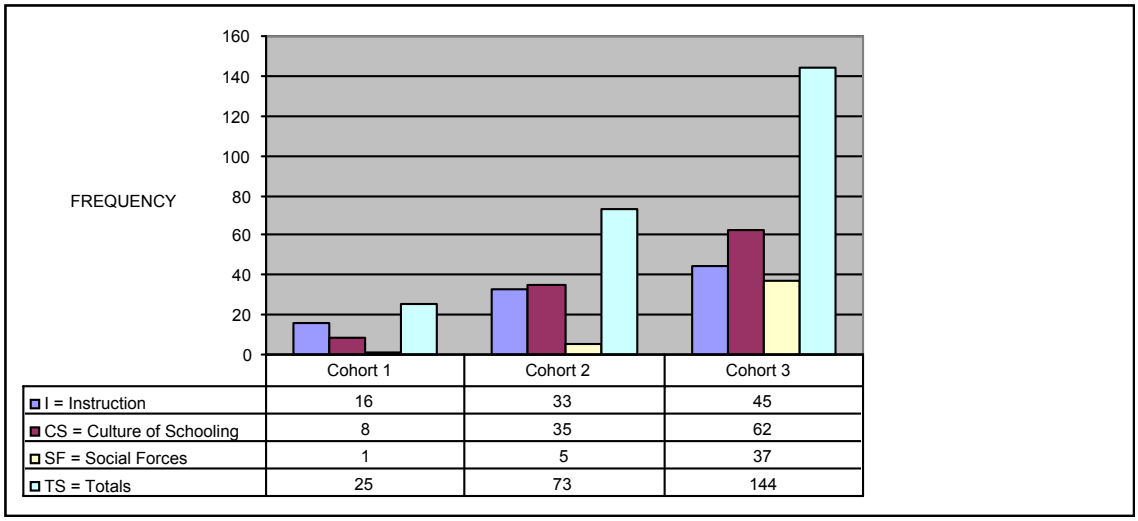


| | Cohort 1 | Cohort 2 | Cohort 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| I = Instruction | 16 | 33 | 45 |
| CS = Culture of Schooling | 8 | 35 | 62 |
| SF = Social Forces | 1 | 5 | 37 |
| TS = Totals | 25 | 73 | 144 |

**FIGURE 2**

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*Discussion: What Was Different?*

In terms of curriculum, there was nothing done with Cohorts 1 and 2 that we did not also do with Cohort 3. However, with each new cohort, we were purposefully more explicit about the critical aspects of literacy. With Cohort 3 we set up literature discussion groups for books that brought students face-to-face with critical issues that related to the urban schools in which they were working. Some of these books were Kozol's *Ordinary Resurrections* (2001) and *Amazing Grace* (1996), *The Dreamkeepers* (Ladson-Billings, 1997), *Discipline and Democracy* (Koshewa, 1999) and *Punished by Rewards* (Kohn, 1999). Another feature that front-loaded a critical perspective into the program for Cohort 3 was the institution of student-led town meetings on a weekly basis. These meetings provided spaces for students to critique the instructional program and the requirements that we set for them.

*The role of "critical" children's books.*

With Cohort 3 we also began to read systematically from a particular set of "critical" children's books each day (Harste, Breau, Leland, Lewison, Ociepka, & Vasquez, 2000.) This text set contained picture books and adolescent novels that supported critical conversations with children. It is not surprising, then, that we received many reflective journal entries that addressed the use of such books with children.

> Reading must also connect to the reader's life experiences. Critical literature must be a part of the classroom. This is when literature can connect to a child's life. Critical literature allows conversations to develop about the issues that are meaningful to the student. Literacy, then, becomes a way to explore life issues (Rita, 12-14-99).
>
> During my internship I noticed that the cooperating teacher had very few books that were critical or that looked at the world through African-American eyes. This probably would not have been a problem except for the fact that she has been teaching for 14 years in a school where at least 80% of her class is African American (Susan, 12-07-99).

These entries show that interns understood the importance of having children of all races see themselves in books and suggest that they were beginning to see how language relates

to issues of identity. Because these books dealt with topics of real concern in our society (e.g. racism, school violence, gangs, drugs), interns saw them as ways to connect school to the life space of the learner.

*Interrogating childhood classics.*

We also conducted a systematic interrogation of children's classics. In examining *Little Red Riding Hood* (Mayer, 1991), for example, interns were asked to look for implicit messages in the text that they might never have noticed before. They generated a list of phrases like "girls should stay on the straight and narrow path," "men are wolves out to take advantage of women," "females of all ages are vulnerable and not very smart," and "real men (woodcutters) can save the day when women get themselves into trouble." By reading several modern versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* (Ernst, 1995; Emberley, 1990), listening to Sam the Sham's rendition of *Hey There, Little Red Riding Hood* and studying advertisements and cartoons that were spun off from the story, they continued to examine the underlying systems of meaning that are perpetuated by what everyone had previously seen as "just an innocent childhood story."

Another engagement evolved from sharing McIntosh's account of *White Privilege* (1988). Interns were invited to write memoirs and reflect on the ways in which they had been privileged (i.e., "It was assumed I would go to college," "Our family went to Myrtle Beach every summer," "Dad bought me a car as a graduation present"). Interns found this exercise extremely difficult, in part, we surmised, because it struck too close to home. While they were good at what we called "claiming the moral high ground," they were often unable to see how their current attitudes, actions and behaviors contributed to the maintenance of the dominant systems of meaning.

The concerns and questions that we were left with at the end of Study One led to a focus on examining the depth of our students' understanding of critical literacy in Study Two. Although we had evidence that our teacher education program was successful in developing students' awareness of critical issues and had seen gains with each group, we also suspected that they did not understand all of the dimensions and subtleties of critical literacy. Study Two, then, was designed to identify the particular aspects of critical literacy that our students did and did not understand.

## Study Two

*Overview*

At one level, critical literacy can be described as a territory in need of a map. In part this is so because it is a perspective that has been developed across a variety of disciplines, including critical race theory, gender studies, post-colonial theory, queer theory, critical language studies, cultural studies, disability studies and more. We see the work in critical literacy as falling into four major categories: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) seeing multiple perspectives, (c) understanding the role of power and politics, and (d) taking action to promote equity and social justice (Leland & Harste, 2000). Study Two documents our efforts to analyze our students' development in each of these areas.

*1. Disrupting the commonplace.*

This category defines critical literacy as the ability to see common or everyday events through a new lens. According to Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys (in press), critical literacy is seen as a way to problematize knowledge (Shor, 1987), interrogate text (Luke & Freebody, 1997), analyze how people are positioned by popular culture (Marsh, 2000,

Shannon, 1995), develop a language of critique and hope (Shannon, 1995), and study language for purposes of disrupting the status quo (Fairclough, 1989, Gee, 1990). Student entries demonstrating this dimension of critical literacy include the following:

> From what I've learned about literacy, we all are literate to a degree as long as we can see and get meaning from symbols…The youngest of the young are literate as long as they are able to get meaning from things around them. No longer will I view certain people as illiterate until I see what meaning they are trying to obtain (Tammy, 12-14-90).

Tammy is reflecting on her new understanding of language as a meaning-making process. She seems to see that definitions of literacy simultaneously define who is and who is not part of the metaphorical literacy club. She may also be developing an understanding that language, discourse and rhetoric do things: they exclude, justify, persuade, label and construct social categories.

> I was very overwhelmed during these first three weeks because everything I was being taught was the opposite of how I was taught in school. (Alice, 12-07-99).

Alice's statement speaks directly to how our teacher education program disrupted her notions of education and teacher preparation. Many students entered our teacher education program thinking they had little to learn as they already knew how to engage groups of students successfully in settings such as Sunday School and day care.

> I was comparing my experience with taking the NTE [National Teacher Examination] and that of my children taking the CTBS (California Test of Basic Skills) at their school. I wrote: "It seems ironic to me that my ability to be a successful teacher is based on a standardized test that questions the validity of standardized testing for students (Marianne, 01-23-01).

Disrupting the commonplace requires that we engage with and distance ourselves from texts. Marianne problematizes testing and begins to develop a counter-narrative using what she knows about practices that are in place as well as what she sees as the social effects of testing.

*2. Seeing multiple perspectives.*

This category highlights the fluid nature of experience and knowledge. It calls attention to the fact that people can be involved in the same events yet interpret and understand them very differently, depending on the perspectives that they bring (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000; Nieto, 1999). Critical literacy from this view is seen as a process of attempting to make difference visible and open to further discussion (Harste et al., 2000). Someone who is critically literate according to this criterion is able to analyze whose voice is heard or privileged in any given text and whose voice is missing from the discussion (Luke & Freebody, 1997).

> The article about the issues of white privilege has been an eye-opener for me. It has made me reconsider my view and my assumptions on the world. I am beginning to see how, simply because of my race, my opportunities have been different (Rita, 4-2000).
>
> Literacy is having an understanding of language, and not only reading, but also reading between the lines... (Stacy, 12-14-99).

Rita's journal entry speaks to ability to look at herself and her lifestyle from the new

perspective of white privilege. Stacy's entry recognizes the importance of teaching students to question text in terms of whose voices are being heard.

> Jay's grandmother seemed to be upset at him and told him he was just being lazy. At first, I really felt bad for Jay. I thought his grandmother was being mean until I remembered the "Staying on Children: Challenging Stereotypes about Urban Parents" article (Compton-Lilly, 2000) that we had read earlier in the semester. Was his grandmother being mean or was this just her way for showing that she cared for him by "staying on him? Putting aside my presuppositions allowed me to consider the notion that, while the way she was talking to Jay was not the way I might talk to my child, it might be a way that was acceptable to both her and Jay. (Rick, 01-20-01).

In this entry, Rick demonstrates his ability to shift perspectives and see how something he himself would not do is acceptable from the perspective of a different cultural group.

*3. Understanding the role of power and politics.*

Although the argument has been made that "education is politics" (Shor & Pari, 2000), it is often difficult to understand teaching as a non-neutral form of social practice. This category focuses on identifying and exploring the ways that political systems, cultural practices and power relationships influence what happens in classrooms. According to this perspective, critical literacy is an attempt to uncover the systems of meaning that operate in society and to understand the connections between language, power and wealth (Fairclough, 1989; Giroux, 2001).

> Not only do I feel the need to find out why some teachers are teaching in a way that is very different from their training, but I must also take a hard look at myself. I need to understand what the realities of the pressures from administration, parents, and peers are. I want to understand the expectations of teachers from a society that sometimes dictates how educators will educate (Rita, 12-14-99).

Rita's reflection shows that she is beginning to understand how teachers get positioned by larger sociopolitical issues. She is puzzled because she sees teachers who she thinks should know better engaging in practices she finds questionable. Implicit in her wondering of how such things happen is a realization that people do not act only on personal beliefs, but also in terms of the norms, values, and standards of groups outside themselves and their profession. This might result in giving them a social identity that runs counter to what they personally or professionally believe.

*4. Taking action to promote equity and social justice.*

This category has been defined by the work of Freire (1972) and may be the mostly widely discussed perspective of critical literacy. Freire argued that equity and social justice are achieved when people take action to transform existing inequities. Examples of other work in this category include Edelsky's (1999) and Christensen's (2000) accounts of teachers working toward critical practice; Comber's (1997) description of how teachers and students in a socioeconomically disadvantaged community were able to both use and resist the managerial discourses that were imposed on them by the larger society; and Janks's (2001) account of the social

action that has supported the language and culture of non-dominant groups in South Africa.

> In working...on my social action project, I was able to conduct a class-led project [saving pennies for puppies at The Humane Society]. In the beginning I was leery of even trying to have the students do this. (Marianne, 04-18-00).

In this example, Marianne realizes that social action projects are an important part of a critical literacy curriculum and that she needs to remember not to underestimate what children are capable of doing.

> I plan to continue working with NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English], WLU [Whole Language Umbrella], and other professional organizations not only to learn about the research of others, but also to do my part...[in] promoting democracy and diversity (Rick, 12-10-99).

Rick's entry speaks directly to his realization that teachers can work collectively to take social action, and this can be facilitated through participation in professional organizations.

*Data Analysis*

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the students' reflective comments according to the critical literacy framework. As can be seen, 53 percent of all reflective journal entries addressed category 1, disrupting the commonplace, 49 percent addressed category 3, understanding the role of power and politics, 10 percent addressed category 2, seeing multiple perspectives, and 3 percent addressed category 4, taking action to promote equity and social justice.

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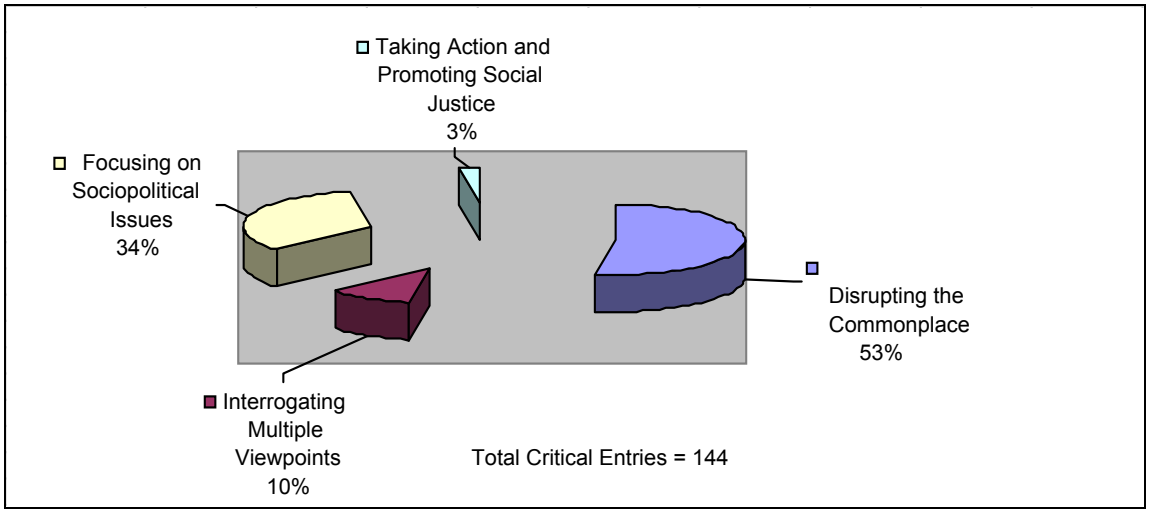


**FIGURE 3**

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We were also interested in knowing whether interns saw critical action as a set of amenable classroom practices. After all, children's books in themselves are not critical-- they are made critical by the social practices in which teachers and children engage as they interact with such books. Although not shown in Figure 3, 117 of the 144 entries, or 81 percent, related critical literacy back to classroom practice.

These data suggest that, as currently constituted, our teacher education program is doing a fairly good job of helping students become aware of the larger

systems of meaning that operate in society. Somewhat problematic, however, is the fact that we could find very few instances of students looking closely at themselves in terms of how their behaviors might work to maintain the inequitable systems of power and privilege that their rhetoric deprecates. We have come to see this dimension of critical literacy as an instance of "having your hand in the cookie jar" (Harste, 2000). Students, it seems, find a self-critical perspective a particularly difficult one to adopt. It is, in a very real sense, easier to see someone else's imperfections than one's own. Equally problematic is the absence of talk relative to the taking of political action and the active promotion of social justice through community action. These data suggest that students are seeing political action in a narrow sense and don't see themselves as participating in large social movements relating to issues of equity and justice.

## Conclusion

Our way of summarizing what we have learned about making teacher education critical is to say that there are four rather obvious components to critical literacy. These include: (1) recognize the need to develop classroom practices that create a more equitable set of social relationships (often students talk about this in terms of fairness), (2) become aware of the larger systems of meaning that operate in society to position them and others in certain ways, (3) identify how it is that they are maintaining inequitable systems of power and privilege through the daily activities in which they engage and the language they use to talk about such activities, and (4) understand the need to take collective community action for purposes of challenging and changing inequitable social practices. Our successes in helping students to understand and internalize the first two components better than the latter two suggest that there might be a different degree of difficulty associated with each.

In addition, these data confirm what we already know: students, regardless of age level, learn what we teach. We began working in the area of critical literacy by helping students see literacy as a particular set of social practices which could be modified through thoughtful classroom practices. Over the three cohorts we have studied, students have learned this lesson well and are able to tie their reflections about critical literacy back to classroom practice. What remains unresolved is the question of how to help students understand their role in terms of maintaining oppressive systems of dominance. Also left undone is the task of helping students see how they might work with children and with their teaching colleagues to take significant social action in the promotion of social justice.

Despite such lingering questions we remain optimistic. Slowly the dimensions of what it means to take a critical perspective in a teacher education program are taking form. These studies suggest that how we conceptualize critical literacy makes a difference. They also show how important it is that we remain open and always ready to interrogate the very practices in which we are engaged as we go about enacting a critical literacy curriculum in teacher education.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Cohort 3: Critical reflection types by semester

Figure 2. Critical reflections by type over cohorts

Figure 3. Cohort 3 reflections according to critical literacy categories.