

Chapter 2

Creating Spaces for Critical Literacy for Bilingual Learners: Korean Kindergartners' Discussions About Race and Gender

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ABSTRACT

With heightened emphasis on critical literacy pedagogies, attention to critical literacy for young children (CLYC) has rapidly increased. Yet, there is a paucity of studies examining CLYC in bilingual settings, particularly in Pre-K contexts. Utilizing a qualitative case study design, the current study examined how early critical literacy can be implemented as a medium to help young bilinguals critique texts and develop critical perspectives about race and gender. The study was conducted in a kindergarten classroom at the Korean Language School in a Midwestern city in the US. The data were collected over a semester using multiple collection sources including audio/video recordings, observational field notes, interviews, and children's artifacts. Findings suggest the potential of early critical literacy practices in bilingual contexts to open critical conversations about race and gender with young children. The study also provides teachers with tips on how to create supportive literary environments for young bilingual children.

INTRODUCTION

With the changing demographics in the United States, diversity has become part of children's daily experiences (Ramsey, 2003; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Children have numerous chances to meet people from racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Ramsey, 2003; Soest & Garcia, 2003). A volume of literature has documented that young children understand race and gender differences from a young age as they start direct observation of the world (Aboud, 1988; Ramsey, 2003; Sorin, 2003; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). However, many teachers still avoid discussing race and gender issues with young children (Dresang, 2003), because they believe that young children "know little or nothing about such things as racial and ethnic matters" (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001, p. 4). Given

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3955-1.ch002

this situation, race and gender awareness does not always develop in a positive way for preschool and kindergarten children (Vuckovic, 2008). Vuckovic (2008) argues that prejudice is especially serious in preschool and kindergarten (Pre-K) children because at those ages “difference” is often related to fear. Children’s prejudice often arises from their own dislike for the differences, rather than simple imitation of their parents (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001; Vuckovic, 2008). An insecure feeling when encountering other skin colors makes them tend to develop negative attitudes toward other racial/ethnic groups (Aboud, 1988; Ramsey, 2003).

As pedagogical approaches to help young children develop positive understandings toward racial, cultural, and other diversities, multicultural education (e.g. Ali & Ancis, 2005; Nieto, 1999, 2004; Nichols, 1999; Pace & Lowery, 2001; Soest & Garcia, 2003), multicultural literature (e.g. Bishop, 1992; Cai, 2002; Harris, 1997) and culturally responsive practices (e.g. Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2004; Vuckovic, 2008) have been emphasized during the last few decades. These studies have highlighted the importance of including multicultural literature and cultural resources in the literacy instruction to benefit *all* children regardless of gender, ethnicity, or class. These studies have provided insights on the significance of teaching children diversity through culturally relevant practices, yet most have been conducted in school-age monolingual children’s contexts. As a result, very little is known about how multicultural practices can be implemented in earlier-age bilingual contexts to teach diversity and critical thinking to children. The dearth of prior studies is especially challenging when considering that multicultural education, critical pedagogies, and bilingual education have the same goal, which is “to prepare professional social workers to transform oppressive and unjust systems into non-oppressive and just alternatives” (Soest & Garcia, 2003, p. 4).

Critical Pedagogies and Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is one of the critical pedagogies that help students question the ideological discourse of texts within social, institutional, and rhetorical contexts (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Freire, 1982). Critical literacy pedagogies encourage readers to question, explore, or challenge the power relations that exist between authors and readers (McDaniel, 2004). Having evolved from multidisciplinary fields including critical pedagogy and feminist theory, critical literacy encourages a critical understanding of race, gender and culture by analyzing the relationships between information and power, racism, sexism, and classism, with an ultimate goal of making literacy learning more hands-on, creative, and expressive (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) summarize several common dimensions in critical literacy pedagogy:

1. **Disrupt a Common Situation or Understanding:** Where students can gain diverse perspectives by understanding the text or situation in a different way.
2. **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.
3. **Focus on Sociopolitical Issues:** Where students examine power relationships between and among individuals.
4. **Take Action and Promote Social Justice:** Where students are invited to determine a course of action to bring about change in unequal power relationships between people.

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