

Chapter 3

Critical Literacy: Using This Framework in Early Childhood Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the definition of critical literacy education as well as the benefits of applying this approach. It analyzes the statement that literacy is not a technical skill, but in fact, it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological notions and power relations in society. The author includes a reflection on how texts are not neutral and the need to encourage children to interrogate what they read and to use language as a way to question inequalities and oppression. The chapter analyzes why this approach has been rarely implemented in early childhood classroom. The author proposes the need for educators to reflect about how their beliefs regarding literacy influence their teaching practices. It argues that children's literature can be a resource to dialogue about identity, culture, diversity, and power relations in society. Finally, it analyzes the importance to build a curriculum based on children's interests and needs as well as to create spaces for critical literacy in early childhood classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Living in a globalized, unequal and conflicting society fosters the need for increased appreciation of diversity as well as the development of critical thinking and reflection skills in order to analyze social, political and power issues. Critical literacy focuses on people reading their world and the words for issues of literacy as an inquiry process deconstructing and reconstructing texts for aspects of power, position and privilege” (Kuby, 2013, p. 14). This framework supports students to question inequalities and oppression in their everyday life. Comber (2001) states that critical literacy stimulates students to use language in powerful ways in order to embrace changes in their communities and the world, as well as to question practices of privilege and injustice. Critical literacy is an approach that has been mostly applied in elementary and secondary classrooms and is rarely included in early childhood classrooms

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(Comber, 2003; Vasquez, 2014). Kuby (2013) states that this absence is not because young children are not ready to engage in critical literacy practices, but because teachers still need to analyze the ingrained beliefs that they have regarding what is appropriate during the early years of education. It is essential for educators to reflect about their previous experiences as learners and how those have shaped their beliefs about what it means to be literate and how literacy should be taught.

BACKGROUND

Literacy teaching has been a controversial issue for as long as society has had a formal schooling system (Meier, 2009). Educators have not yet agree on what it means to be literate and the most appropriate method to teach young children to read and write. The different definitions of literacy and the teaching approach is influenced by educators previous experiences as well as their ideology as educators. It is also important to comprehend that texts are not neutral and why it is important to teach literacy as a skill that is not only technical. Literacy should encourage people to think critically, question texts, as well as transform themselves and the world around them. An approach that supports students to do this is critical literacy which is rooted in the principles of critical pedagogy, which enhances the need to work towards the pursuit of democracy and justice (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015).

Definition(s) of Literacy

Literacy is complex and its definition is influenced by time, contexts, cultures as well as the needs and practices of the people who use it. The definitions of what it means to be literate also reflect different theoretical, ideological and philosophical perspectives. “Early literacy development and instruction during both the preschool period and the first years of formal schooling is certainly the most studied and arguably the most theoretically and politically contentious area of literacy teaching and practice” (Teal et al., 2009, p. 77). There has also been controversy regarding what are the essential skills that children must develop in order to be considered literate. The different perspectives also establish what are the appropriate learning experiences and resources that educators should implement in order to support students in becoming literate. Luke and Freebody (1999) assert that “literacy is never neutral (...) it is always situated within a series of ideologies or beliefs that shape what we do” (p. 14). The approaches are based on diverse learning theories as well as ideologies about what being literate means (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002).

There is no one definition or fixed concept of what literacy means. Rather, literacy can be defined depending on the context, goals of education in an specific society and ideology of the curriculum. A definition that is focused on a skills-based approach to literacy sees texts as an objective reality that should be decoded by the learner in order to comprehend the meaning written by the author. According to this approach, it is necessary to teach how to decode smaller pieces of language and when this has been mastered, children can then learn to decode words and later on phrases (Meier, 2009). However, reading is not only about decoding symbols in order to comprehend a message but actively reflecting on how the meaning of a text is connected to our lives (Fain & Horn, 2011).

According to Street (2003), literacy is not simply a technical and neutral skill, but is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological notions and power relations in society. According to Comber (2014) literacy encompasses operational, cultural and critical dimensions. Willinsky (2007) argues that,

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