

Five Things School Administrators Should Know About Critical Literacy

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Abstract

This article outlines five things school administrators need to know about how to help their teachers and department chairs to improve literacy comprehension through the teaching of critical literacy. Research based strategies for teaching critical literacy and developing curriculum are discussed.

Although a variety of theoretical underpinnings inform definitions of critical literacy, critical literacy generally involves processes of critiquing texts from a variety of standpoints (Janks, 2014). Critical literacy is a component of effective reading comprehension. This “critical” component of literacy comprehension is often ignored in the teaching of literacy. This article provides guidance to administrators for monitoring the inclusion of critical literacy as part of a comprehensive reading and language arts curriculum.

Research supports that critical literacy practices in the classroom improve student reading comprehension (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Molden, 2007). National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA) Standards for the English Language Arts includes the following statement about teaching critical literacy: “Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities” (NCTE, 2012, p. 3). Critical literacy activities engage students in interrogating positions of privilege and questioning injustices in our present time and in history. Teachers can lead students to consider ways to increase active participation in promoting positive change in schools and communities.

Critical Literacy

Most likely, the teachers in your school already teach their students some critical literacy skills; however, students may not be practicing enough higher-level critical literacy to effectively analyze and evaluate the variety of texts they will encounter in college and beyond. The following five points will guide your supervision of teachers and curricula.

Critical Literacy and Critical Thinking

Critical *literacy* should not be confused with critical *thinking*. Although there are many definitions of critical *thinking*, thinking critically involves using reasoning and problem solving to look beyond the facts (Weissberg, 2013). In Bloom's Taxonomy, Analysis, Evaluation, and Synthesis require critical *thinking*. Critical *literacy* involves processes of critical thinking for purposes of analyzing and evaluating texts, but critical literacy also involves the interrogation of power structures underlying or contributing to the writing or production of texts. When students analyze texts using critical literacy, they are "questioning, examining, or disputing the power relations that exist between readers and authors" (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 14). For example, a critical interpretation of the *Emancipation Proclamation* would include a discussion of the political events, the people in power in both the North and the South, the abuse of African American people, and how political and social issues affected the writing of the document.

By practicing critical literacy, students are thinking critically by evaluating and analyzing texts. For example, "questioning the author," a commonly referenced comprehension strategy, invites students to critically analyze writers' choices and the circumstances surrounding the writing of the text in question.

Critical Literacy Practices Involve Higher Levels of Thinking

Critical literacy, a higher form of analysis involves interrogation, critique, and evaluation. These are skills that all students, including low-achieving readers and English language learners, need to develop for higher level thinking and literacy understanding (Angay-Crowder, Choi, & Yi, 2013; Fredericks, 2012; Lau, 2012; Rozansky & Aagesen, 2010).

Although some researchers caution against too narrow of a definition of critical literacy, activities may include: "Identifying multiple voices in texts, dominant cultural discourses, multiple possible readings of texts, and sources of authority where texts are used and critiquing and producing a wide range of texts" (Behrman, 2006, p. 481). Activities in the classroom that reflect a critical literacy framework also involve questioning and analyzing the language of a text, and how the language reflects the author's purpose and context.

Critical Literacy Activities Improve Reading Comprehension

Critical literacy is a form of comprehension that goes beyond a literal reading or summarization of key ideas. Critical literacy activities invite readers to become active participants in the reading process and to question beyond the obvious while continuing to understand the inherent messages within texts (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Molden, 2007). Students who are only taught to be passive recipients of information rely only on low-level comprehension and may be misguided by incorrect or incomplete information.

Active readers are those who are strategic about gaining meaning from texts while capitalizing on their personal experiences and skills as readers and information-gatherers. Researchers have identified activities that reflect “participatory approaches,” which are intertextual in nature and may require students to incorporate home and cultural experiences along with literacy skills and background information. Critical literacy activities often reflect such participatory approaches in which “students are synthesizing information from multiple texts while making their own interpretations of texts” (Wade & Moje, 2000, p. 67).

Critical Literacy Should be Practiced

Critical literacy should be practiced using a variety of texts---visual, oral discussions, technology, and other media. Many, if not most, states incorporate some form of media literacy in their social studies standards to prepare students for active citizenship. *The National Social Studies Standards* (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994) include the following statement: “We must encourage [students] to be critical and copious readers of the best media, print, audio and video content. . .” (p. 7). Students also need to be taught to question how news media works in preparation, “how sources are identified and used, and who owns the media” (Ross, 2010, p. 92). Teaching students to analyzing the audience, purpose and owners of news media is a form of critical literacy.

Media literacy has been defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and effectively communicate in a variety of forms including print and nonprint texts (Considine & Haley, 1999). “Social studies and other content teachers who focus on critical media literacy, ask students to interrogate the power structures that produce political messages through the internet, television, radio, newspapers and other media” (Lennon, Smith & Byford, 2014, p. 2). Students who acquire their civic education via discussions of political issues over didactic instruction and rote memorization demonstrate a less authoritarian attitude (Hahn, 1999). Discussion of critical and public policy issues teaches students to actively participate in local politics and civic action (Hahn, 2001; Hass & Laughlin, 2002).

ELL Students and Special Education Students

These students should not be excluded from critical literacy practices. Students need to evaluate and analyze the author’s purpose, and the political and environmental influences of a text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). English Language Learner (ELL) students and struggling readers of all ages have been shown to increase levels of comprehension by participating in critical analyses of adolescent literature (Falk-Ross, 2002; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Molden, 2007; Purcell-Gates et al., 2012).

Critical literacy strategies involve helping students make personal connections with texts, critiquing and evaluating, texts, and analyzing purpose and power structures (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Molden, 2007). Readers’ responses to literature are centered in themselves as individual thinkers and cultural participants. James Marshall (2000) explains, “A reader’s culture, in other words, is both outside and, in some ways

inside the reader, and thus constitutes the material of which responses themselves are made” (p. 393). In her research with “at-risk” students, Sullivan (2007) found that when students were immersed in a literacy rich environment that capitalized on student culture and experiences, students were able to successfully comprehend, write about, and discuss the book *House on Mango Street*. Latino, African-American and Caucasian at-risk students were able to appreciate the novel aesthetically through critique and analysis from their own perspectives.

When struggling readers and English language learners read texts they can connect to on personal levels, they will not only stay motivated, but also will feel empowered as they improve their literacy learning (Sullivan, 2007). Schander, Blama, and Massa (2013) recommend motivating ELL students to improve reading comprehension through literature, art, and music. Through explorative activities in a variety of media, students are motivated to learn language and comprehend texts.

Final Recommendations

Journals published by the *International Reading Association*, *National Council for Teachers of English*, and *National Council for the Social Studies*, among others, include articles that describe research-based practices teachers can incorporate into their classrooms. Some of these articles are included in the references.

Critical literacy expands all content areas and in everyday life. In science, for example, students can explain and critique theories, methods, contradictory claims, etc. in science text (Brickman et al., 2012; Robbins & Roy, 2007). In math, for example, students can evaluate mathematical problems and solutions and interrogate the use and misuse of numbers (Frankenstein, 2014).

Teachers can learn to become more critically literate through professional development workshops. McLaughlin and DeVogd’s (2004) book on critical literacy teaching discusses a variety of strategies to help teachers become more critically literate themselves. This book also includes lesson plans, assessment tools, and bibliographies to support teachers in developing a repertoire of strategies for teaching students critical literacy. In the end, increased knowledge of critical literacy strategies and practices will help teachers prepare their students for the literacy requirements they will face in college and future careers.

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