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Integrating Critical Literacy in the Middle School Classroom

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This article focuses on the integration of critical literacy in the middle school classroom. The author first explains critical literacy and the importance of incorporating it in the middle school curriculum. Then, a framework is presented in order to aid practitioners in implementing critical literacy instruction. Examples from relevant literature are presented as well, along with suggestions for how educators can begin teaching critical literacy and integrating it into their lessons.

Introduction

The practice of incorporating critical literacy in the classroom has been touted as highly important and urgent. Norris, Lucas, and Prudhoe (2012) noted that since most classroom teachers are not of the same demographics as their students, students from diverse backgrounds need learning opportunities that include their own identities and cultures, as well as allow them to explore the similarities and differences among those present in the classroom (Norris et al.). Additionally, such instruction can be vital in a middle school classroom, where “to engage adolescents, literacy instruction must capture their minds and speak to the questions they have about the world as they contemplate their place within it” (Ippolito, Steele, & Samson, 2008, p. 2).

Critical literacy instruction creates a space for this honest contemplation and questioning of the world and society, and invites students to “read, write, listen, view, and speak in order to recognize and confront inequities in their lives” (Wood, Soares, & Watson, 2006, p. 57). By approaching texts and media as “a means for construing, shaping, and reshaping worlds in particular normative directions with identifiable ideological interests and consequences for individuals and communities” (Luke, Woods, Fisher, Bruett, & Fink, 2009, p. 9), critical literacy instruction allows students to examine texts from their own point of view as well as others to delve into the underlying messages within a text, expose them, and use them to transform learning. This allows students to have a voice “in those life influences that arrive inside and outside the classroom” (Wood et al., p. 55) by examining current societal issues. Through “an explicit aim of developing useful, powerful mastery of texts to transform lived social relations and material conditions,” critical

literacy instruction can teach students to master language use in order to use it to recognize, confront, and combat inequities that they see in their schools and lives (Luke et al., p. 9).

The concept of critical literacy transforms students’ ability to make meaning of texts to an empowering capacity to “read the world” (Mey, 1986) and “rewrite, redesign, and reshape it in communities’ interests” (Luke et al., 2009, p. 9). Instructing middle school students in critical literacy, while laudable, may seem quite daunting, especially when teachers face an already full curriculum.

Given the benefits of including critical literacy in the middle school classroom, I wanted to explore the literature on implementing critical literacy lessons in the middle school classroom in order to gain a better perspective on how this can be done. Below I discuss the resulting findings of my work. I first discuss the varying definitions of critical literacy, as well as provide my own working definition of the term. Then I present a review of literature. In doing so, I provide examples and discuss how current practitioners can implement similar critical literacy lessons in the classroom.

What is Critical Literacy?

While Edward Behrman (2006) acknowledged that “critical literacy is now well established as a major ideological construct influencing literacy education” (p. 490), the term still lacks a clear definition (Lewinson, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). The concept of critical literacy is theoretically diverse and combines ideas from various critical theories, such as critical linguistics, feminist theory, critical race theory, as well as reader response theory and cultural and media studies (Luke et al., 2009). Although many researchers have expounded on the definition of critical literacy (Lewinson et. Al.; Luke, 2012;

McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), the explanations differ. Luke's (2012) definition purports critical literacy to be "the use of technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rules systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life" (p. 5, as cited in Luke, 2004). McLaughlin and DeVogd present four principles of critical literacy—focusing on issues of power and promoting reflection; examining problems and their complexity; examining multiple perspectives; and utilizing techniques that are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used. Still others, such as Wolfe (2010), argue that critical literacy is "the development of critical or 'resistant' reading skills" (p. 370) and, as part of critical pedagogy, must involve social action.

While the inclusion of social action is still debated (Wolfe, 2010), the overall goal of critical literacy seems to be the same: "to raise students' critical and social consciousness" (Delaney, 2007, p. 56) and to equip "students to engage in a dialogue with texts and society instead of silently consuming other people's words" (Christensen, 2006, p. 393). This goal is perhaps more important than a mere definition, and it is what I will focus on in my consideration of critical literacy. Knowing the goal, however, leads us to another question: How?

How Do We Teach Critical Literacy in Middle School?

By Developing a Critical Lens

To begin, teachers can adopt a critical lens and apply it to the lessons they are already teaching. To do this, teachers should ask themselves critical questions regarding the texts used in their lessons, as well as the lessons in their entirety. For example, whose perspective is represented in the lessons taught and the texts used? What worldview is represented in these lessons and texts? How could these lessons incorporate other perspectives and worldviews? Adopting a critical lens will allow teachers to see where new texts can be incorporated to represent new perspectives, or where critical questions can be asked. Furthermore, teachers can use technology to allow students to take what they are learning outside the classroom, potentially leading to the social action component of critical literacy that was discussed earlier (Avila & Moore, 2012).

By Changing Our Perceptions of Middle School Students

Middle grades teachers should begin to view their students in a more contingent, recursive way (Lesko, 2001; Vagle, 2011). As Lesko indicated, the mainstream view of adolescence allows adults and the government to "control, study, measure, anticipate, and redirect the individual" (Vagle, p. 363). Teachers should consider adopting what Vagle calls a contingent, recursive humility:

A kind of humility marked at once by an active pursuit of student (teacher) agency in the unpredictable and unknown (Shor, 1996) and a critical examination of some of the ways in which the teacher educator-student teacher relationship becomes racialized (Lensmire, 2008) in this pursuit. (p. 363)

Vagle (2011) points out that the way teachers view middle school students affects how they speak, listen, and even teach them. By refusing to view adolescence as a clearly defined developmental stage, teachers can embrace the complexity of this stage and begin to redress how they might dialogue with their students. In doing so, teachers can tear down assumptions of what middle grades students can and cannot do, and open the door to critical discourse with their students (Vagle).

By Altering Our Lessons

Once teachers have developed a critical lens and considered their views on what middle school students can and cannot do, they must begin examining their existing lessons as well as planning new ones to incorporate critical literacy. When considering how to tweak existing lesson plans or creating new ones to incorporate critical literacy, teachers might consider the suggestions and examples presented below.

Ask critical questions. In order to teach critical literacy, teachers must ask critical questions about all texts—including the textbook. While several researchers have provided lists of questions that can be used during a critical literacy lesson (Lester, 1995; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), Wood et al. (2006) gave suggestions for questions to be used specifically with middle-school students to promote critical literacy. By asking questions such as, "Who do you think is behind the construction of this text?" and "Whose view of

the world is put forth in the text?” (Wood et al., p. 56), teachers can give students opportunities to consider their own opinions about the perspectives and interpretations of a text. Such questioning also promotes higher order thinking (Wood et al.).

Explore alternative perspectives.

Exploring and working to understanding various viewpoints is an important tenet of critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2002; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Students must develop and reflect on their own viewpoint as well as learn “to communicate with and learn from those who hold different perspectives” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 243).

One example of how to incorporate these alternative perspectives into a lesson is presented by Maples and Groenke (2009). They desired to combat middle-school students’ prejudices against immigrants. To do so, they explored the topic of “Who is an American?” using a discussion scenario activity (McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, & Flanagan, 2006) and the book *Seedfolks*. In this lesson, groups of students were given short descriptions of people (some were based on ordinary people, while others were famous, such as Timothy McVeigh and Elian Gonzalez, although the students did not receive the people’s actual names) and had to rate them on a chart that ranged from “least American” to “most American.” The students then had to explain why they rated certain people as they did, which prompted discussion when the students’ opinions differed. Following this activity, the class read *Seedfolks*, a book of short stories of people who live in Cleveland, Ohio, and who each come from different ethnic groups. Students were asked to consider different reasons a person might want to come to the US as well as the different types of immigration, which resulted in students thinking more critically about their preconceived notions and stereotypes regarding immigrants.

This lesson prompted students to first consider their own ideas regarding what it means to be American. Through the conversations brought up from the discussion scenario activity (McCann et al., 2006), students encountered perspectives that differed from their own. Students had to converse with each other and consider differing opinions. After reading *Seedfolks*, students had to consider their original thoughts of what being an American means in

the new context of immigration and the people’s stories that are presented in the book.

Incorporate supplementary, multiple, and/or multimodal texts. Including multiple texts can be very important in allowing students to explore differing perspectives of multiple authors as well as see the non-neutrality of texts through comparison. As Behrman (2006) stated, “Often teachers find that to develop a critical perspective, traditional classroom texts need to be supplemented by other works of fiction, nonfiction, film, or popular culture” (p. 492). Furthermore, “Reading multiple texts encourages students to understand authorship as situated activity” (p. 493). Supplementing canonical, traditional texts, or even the textbook, can help students gain a critical perspective of those traditional texts as well as better understand the subjectivity of authors (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Furthermore, it can better engage students with traditional texts that they might not identify with otherwise (Chun, 2009; Lesley, 2008; Wood & Jocius, 2013).

A study conducted by Delaney (2007) involved students comparing outside information to the information in their textbooks. This lesson used World War II propaganda to teach students to be critical about what they read and see. In this study, the teacher began the lesson by showing a 1942 propaganda movie, “Menace of the Rising Sun,” the goal of which was to anger Americans at the Japanese. Students then discussed the way information was depicted in the movie, why it was depicted in this manner, examine the facts that were included and omitted, and to see the ways in which the film intended to manipulate its audience. Following this, the teacher conducted other lessons in which the students looked at other texts and media to see issues of power and hidden biases. Students then conducted an inquiry project in which they chose topics that occurred between WWII and the Gulf War. Students had to find sources of information outside their textbook and compare it to what was in their textbooks. Students were not only more engaged with the information they were able to discover outside their textbooks, but they also learned that their textbooks often left out personal accounts and seemed to be altered to present a more ‘kid-friendly’ view of the historical occurrences.

Through this activity, students learned first-hand that texts are not neutral and can present

information in a biased manner. Furthermore, students were able to see that even their textbook depicts events in a way that may not be wholly accurate. By including supplemental texts on the same topic and highlighting the differences, a teacher can begin to show students the subjectivity of authors and teach them to examine texts from a critical perspective.

Create critical projects. Though teachers can alter lessons to teach critical literacy, they can also use projects to promote and assess critical literacy. Some of the articles discussed above also incorporated some sort of assignment that included elements of critical literacy instruction; these will be discussed below to provide examples.

Some suggestions Wood et al. (2006) offered could be used as “critical projects” within a context. For example, they noted that teachers can use poetry as a way to allow students to express their ideas and opinions on various topics. Teachers can even hold a Poetry Slam so that students can demonstrate their work. Wood et al. also suggested students can write letters to an editor of a newspaper or magazine on a topic that they have been studying; this would be a way for students to take the social action to which Wolfe (2010) referred. The authors also mentioned using student-choice research projects and varied forms of creative writing or performing to explore issues; these two will be discussed below.

Delaney’s (2007) study used a student inquiry project in a middle-school context in order to promote critical literacy. This project not only incorporated multiple texts and taught students to read with a critical perspective, but it also resulted in a student-choice research project. Students were able to choose topics which interested them or which related to them; as Delaney noted, “Most students selected a topic based on their heritage or a connection to an event” (p. 32). After conducting their inquiry projects, students presented their findings with the class through timed, memorized skits that they created. Skits included: a reenactment of the Hiroshima bombing by using a toy airplane, a golf ball, and a village made of Lego blocks and an enactment of an old Mao Tse-Tung’s memories of the Sino-Japanese war. As Delaney indicated, “Skits seemed to have the most empowering effect on these middle school students. It gave them voice to express their interpretations of the media, texts, and Internet

information they accessed” (p. 33).

Through this project, students were able to retell a historical event in their own way through their own understanding. The class could have also examined the different representations each student presented to see how their own representations were still non-neutral and depicted a specific person’s point of view. Furthermore, holding a public performance of using the methods described in Boal’s (1985) *Theatre of the Oppressed* might transform class projects such as this into social action.

Conclusion

Above I have presented suggestions and examples detailing ways in which a teacher can begin to incorporate critical literacy in the middle school classroom. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that the planning and implementation of such lessons can be difficult, as most teachers already struggle to fit their curriculum into a single year, as well as strive to meet prescribed state and national standards. Despite these difficulties, I feel it is imperative that teachers strive to bring critical literacy lessons into the already existing curriculum. Critical literacy better engages students with content (Chun, 2009; Lesley, 2008; Wood & Jocius, 2013) and teachers can use critical literacy lessons to meet required standards such as Common Core (Avila & Moore, 2012; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Though the process of implementing critical literacy can be difficult, it is important to remember that it takes time. As McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) stated:

When examining the teacher’s role, it is important to note that we cannot just “become critical.” It is a process that involves learning, understanding, and changing over time. This includes developing theoretical, research, and pedagogical repertoires; changing with time and circumstance; engaging in self-critical practices; and remaining open to possibilities. (p. 55 citing Comber, 2001)

Although critical literacy is now an established construct that influences literacy education (Behrman, 2006, citing Cadeiro-Kaplan, 2002), a clear set of instructional strategies that would allow for a clear curricular approach is still

lacking (Behrman, 2006). I must acknowledge that suggestions along with the studies presented above merely serve as a few examples of how this can be done. Through these examples, however, I hope to inspire educators of middle school students to begin the process of which McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) speak, and develop an ongoing critical literacy pedagogy in their classrooms.

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