



Equity Dispatch

Critical and Inclusive Practices
in Literacy



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June 2016



“Critical literacy has as its goal the development of responsible citizens, able to confront social inequities in their many forms and take action against injustices.”

-Ann S. Beck, 2005, p. 399



Did You Know

Critical and Inclusive Practices in Literacy is
More Than Reading

Critical and inclusive practices in literacy are more than being mindful of what

materials are used in the classroom; they are how inequitable power structures are interrogated, deconstructed, and confronted in and through everyday literary engagement (Behrman, 2006; Frey & Fisher, 2014; Janks, 2013; Shor, 1999). Further, they are how information is operationalized to engender agency in students and promote social change (Behrman, 2006; Janks, 2013; Lee, 2011; Shor, 1999). Grounded in elements of both critical literacy practices and [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#), employing critical and inclusive practices in literacy provide an avenue that ensures equitable access to the curriculum for all students regardless of and responsive to students' differences (Waitoller & Thorius, accepted).

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is the process of analyzing and challenging the status quo through examining the roles power and privilege hold in literary spheres; an integral piece is recognizing and understanding one's own proximity to the subject (Behrman, 2006; Frey & Fisher, 2014; Janks, 2013; Shor, 1999). Strengthening this idea are elements of UDL, a method whose inclusive approach to curriculum design is flexible with regard to the ways information is presented, ways students are supported to demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged in learning experiences to address learner variability and promote learning of all students (National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2013; Lancaster, 2008).

Integrating critical and inclusive literacy practices in the classroom can promote a co-constructed learning environment whose goal is to not only engage in reading and writing to build fundamental skills as an element of functional literacy, but to facilitate deep understanding of information and confidence to audaciously analyze, question, and change the world (Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002; Lee, 2011; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013, Waitoller & Thorius, accepted).

Critical and inclusive literacy practice is not a pedagogical technique, but a way of being that shifts the focus from the literary canon by challenging false notions of neutrality in all forms (Beck, 2005; Behrman, 2006; Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002; Lee, 2011). Implementing critical and inclusive practices in literacy requires a level of [critical consciousness](#), self-efficacy, and reflection in order to effectively navigate educational content and practices, and excavate content and methods that are marginalizing and oppressive.

Educators must first [self-reflect](#) on their own positions and implicit biases to avoid perpetuating stereotypes through choices in curricular content, materials, instructional practices, etc., and to recognize, as well as support students to recognize when these biases and stereotypes are present (Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002). This reflection must also consider differences and variations in students' language, physical, sensory, and/or cognitive dis/abilities, and whether they are genuinely included in the curriculum during design, or if they are simply accommodated afterward (Lancaster, 2008).

It is important to understand the nuances of critical and inclusive practices in literacy before they can be applied across the curriculum. First, critical literacy is not a cookie-cutter curriculum that can be applied in all classrooms; it is a way of thinking that must be tailored to fit the lived experiences and dynamics of students in order to be meaningful (Behrman, 2006).

Second, critical literacy and critical thinking should not be conflated. Although critical literacy involves levels of critical thinking, the difference lies in taking analysis a step further to surface and trouble the biases that may be presented

within text and other content representations. It is also about being cognizant of how these biases play out (e.g. privileging some and marginalizing others) (Lee, 2011; Smith, 2015).

Third, critical literacy and multicultural literacy are not interchangeable. Although multiculturalism is important, critical literacy extends multicultural education; critical literacy does not just focus on appreciating cultural pluralism—it is an analysis of power dynamics that are in play in our world. Critical and inclusive practices in literacy force us to decentralize the dominant narrative as the only narrative and explore the effects of social dominance (Skelton, personal communication, April 18).

Finally, literacy skills extend beyond reading to encompass “speaking, writing, viewing, listening and visually representing;” including through the use of assistive devices (Lee, 2011, p. 100); this perspective expands the idea of literacy as a comprehensive process. With the additions of critical literacy practices and UDL, critical and inclusive practices in literacy stretch beyond the typical literacy education approach and precipitate a paradigmatic shift.

Ensuring Equal Access to Information

Critical and inclusive practices in literacy also recognize the value in appreciating difference, focus on ensuring that historically marginalized individuals have equal access to information, and are accurately represented in literary content. It is important to note that access to learning does not solely mean materials, but learning itself; this is so that all students’ capacities to learn and grow is the ultimate goal (Rose, 2000). This means making a concerted effort to have curricula that are inclusive and reflective of all student identities and abilities (Lancaster, 2008). Flexibility in both introducing and delivery of content, providing multiple ways to engage in the content, and providing options for students to express what they know eliminates barriers and respects students’ differences (Lancaster, 2008; Rose, 2000).

The central goal of educating through critical and inclusive practices in literacy is to convey that language is not neutral, and by extension neither is the world in which we live; it enables students of all backgrounds and abilities to use this knowledge to (re)construct their realities towards self-empowerment.



Why It Matters

Critical and Inclusive Practices in Literacy Encourages Students to Read and (Re)Write the World--and Themselves (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Waitoller & Thorius, accepted).

Using critical and inclusive practices in literacy provides an educator the opportunity to move beyond the basic expectations of schooling and to hone a sense of sociopolitical awareness and action in their students. Schools are also places that may perpetuate uneven power relationships that are present in dominant society, whose required curricula often reflect those power dynamics. For example, the mechanical way in which some children are taught to read and

comprehend text is a form of social order, focusing on “rudimentary functional job skills” (Beck, 2005; Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002, p. 373).

Students are typically situated within schools with “sanitized” (Behrman, 2006, p. 492) literature that provides only one perspective. Nestled within these dynamics are the supposed neutral and normative ways of teaching literacy, which are impositions on students who do not connect culturally, socially, physically, and/or linguistically (Cadiero-Kaplan & Smith, 2002). Because traditionally required curricula tend to be oppressive and suppressive to many students, educators are responsible for creating safe spaces where all students, especially students from historically marginalized groups, are encouraged to demystify this literature to move towards exploring the power words have on shaping the world around them (Behrman, 2006; Janks, 2013). Schools should be a place that prepares students to enter the world, being able to think through and make sense of who they are in relation to what they are seeing and encountering.

Critical and inclusive practices in literacy are imbedded in sociopolitical and cultural ways of viewing the world (Shor, 1999); as such, literacy practices in the classroom should be approached in ways that analyze and dismantle systems of oppression presented in content. These approaches become empowering tools that equip students with the rights and responsibilities that enable them to become active citizens (Beck, 2005). In this way, educators can begin to help cultivate students who are prepared and unafraid to exercise their voices and agencies in the classroom and in the world, who contribute to equity, and who respect difference (Janks, 2013).



For Equity Now

What to Consider While Engaging Critical and Inclusive Practices in Literacy

Engaging critical and inclusive practices in literacy is no easy feat; there is a level of determination that must be present to encourage this paradigm shift. There are several things to consider while engaging this revolutionary way of educating and thinking. Below are suggestions of strategies to consider before and during implementing critical and inclusive practices in literacy:

Before: Educators must employ self-reflective strategies to discover what biases they may hold, moving beyond a “superficial understanding of self and others” (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2016, p.2). When constructing the curriculum, educators must be sure they are considering all students’ identities and abilities while creating content, and not simply “accommodating” students’ potential barriers to learning (Lancaster, 2008; Rose, 2000). In addition to this, a reflection on the politics of curricula materials is imperative to this process so that harmful practices are not perpetuated (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002).

During: Conversations about power and privilege, especially with historically marginalized groups, can be emotionally jarring. Coupled with logistical challenges that educators may face (e.g. classroom management, school settings that dictate teachers' independence, the absence of a "model" to follow being a barrier—particularly for new teachers, etc.), the atmosphere may become challenging, lively, and passionate (Beck, 2005). A balancing act of sorts must occur to ensure students' productivity and safety. It is important to encourage dialogue around students' social conditions and lifting all student voices, while discouraging the blatant breaking of school rules in anger without purpose; this requires a level of discernment of when and how to address inequities in class, or when and how to take action in the community (Beck, 2005, p. 396). The goal is to create and maintain a safe environment where students feel comfortable employing literacy practices to voice their thoughts, opinions, and concerns—while guiding towards rational decisions.

Some Guidance: Morrell (2002) speaks to the importance of tapping into students' lived experiences when choosing materials, in order to ensure an accessible curriculum; this ensures that attainability of information is the end goal, not just modifications to existing curricula (Lancaster, 2008). For example, Frey and Fisher (2014) examine the importance of using critical literacy to enrich citizenship so that students are less likely to be influenced by misinformation and propaganda. They suggest doing this by using texts to promote civic engagement, and to examine personal freedom, social injustices, controversial topics, and calls to action (Frey & Fisher, 2014). What if educators are bound to the literary canon? In addition to using supplementary materials, Foss (2002), an 8th grade teacher, reported she felt pressure from the school to use *To Kill a Mockingbird* in her class; because of this she knew she had to make it meaningful for her students. In her unique situation in an affluent, predominately White school, Foss (2002) used the following guiding ideas to inform her approach to the text, and to foster students' reflection:

- [E]xamin[e] the institution of school and how it functions in our lives;
- [I]dentify individuals' multiple subject positions and development of an understanding that experiences, such as reading, are socially constructed;
- [R]ecogni[ze] and problematiz[e] the privilege that permeates our lives (p. 395).

Engaging critical and inclusive practices in literacy is a journey towards an emancipatory way of being. Through the use of critical literacy practices and the application of UDL principles in the classroom, educators create accessible and representative learning opportunities, and help develop students who are more aware of the power and privilege that drives every day sociocultural structures. Ultimately as a result of the co-construction of safe space, educators begin to help students evolve into critical agents of social change.

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