Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices

What does critical literacy look like in the classrooms of teachers who are just beginning to implement critical practices?

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Published writing about critical literacy recently expanded from mostly theoretical pieces to include an increased number of teacher-authored accounts describing critical literacy practices in classrooms (Christensen, 2000; Edelsky, 1999; Heffernan & Lewis, 2000; Vasquez, 1998). These teacher narratives and research stories are often quite impressive, showing a sophisticated understanding of how critical literacy can be enacted in classrooms. But what about educators who are just starting on a journey toward making curriculum critical? What does critical literacy look like in their classrooms? Typically these teachers have read a little and maybe attended a conference session, but they readily admit they don’t know much about what critical literacy is or what it means for them as teachers.

This article describes a portion of our work with a group of elementary teachers during the first eight months of an ongoing study investigating critical literacy in classrooms. Most of the teachers were also participants in monthly study group sessions that have been running since October 1997 (Lewison & Flint, 2002). Thirteen teachers expressed interest in expanding their understandings of critical literacy more intensively than study group participation afforded. We secured two grants that gave continuing support for study group meetings, purchased social issues books for classroom libraries, offered Saturday workshops, supported teachers attending conferences, and provided for regular classroom observations. These thirteen teachers welcomed us into their classrooms, which enabled us to understand more deeply how a critical literacy curriculum is enacted in classrooms and the challenges that arise.

Here we examine the understandings and classroom practices of two groups of teachers: newcomers who joined the project not knowing what a critical literacy curriculum might look like and novices who had some prior background with critical literacy and had recently begun classroom implementation. We examined these two groups to provide insights into the concerns teachers have when they begin implementing critical practices in their classrooms, what these practices look like, and what support is most helpful for newcomers and novices.

What Is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy has been described in many different ways by numerous literacy educators, theorists, and linguists. We reviewed a range of definitions that appeared in the research and professional literature over the last 30 years and synthesized these into four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice. These four dimensions, which guided this study and the interpretation of data, are interrelated—none stand alone.

Disrupting the Commonplace

In this dimension, critical literacy is conceptualized as seeing the “every-
day” through new lenses. We use language and other sign systems to recognize implicit modes of perception and to consider new frames from which to understand experience. From this dimension, critical literacy is seen as a way of

- Problematizing all subjects of study and understanding existing knowledge as a historical product (Shor, 1987);
- Interrogating texts by asking questions such as “How is this text trying to position me?” (Luke & Freebody, 1997);
- Including popular culture and media as a regular part of the curriculum for purposes of pleasure and for analyzing how people are positioned and constructed by television, video games, comics, toys, etc. (Marsh, 2000; Shannon, 1995; Vasquez, 2000);
- Developing the language of critique and hope (Shannon, 1995); and
- Studying language to analyze how it shapes identity, constructs cultural discourses, and supports or disrupts the status quo (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1990).

This dimension of disrupting the commonplace is historically a radical stance for elementary teachers to adopt. Their traditional role is one of disempowerment, with teachers perceived as transmitters of “knowledge and curriculum” that have been dictated from above (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). As teachers develop the language of critique that Shannon (1995) advocates, the potential arises to develop an activist perspective toward their roles and responsibilities as educators.

Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints

Authors who describe the multiple-viewpoints dimension of critical literacy ask us to imagine standing in the shoes of others—to understand experience and texts from our own perspectives and the viewpoints of others and to consider these various perspectives concurrently. In this dimension we engage in a process of

- Reflecting on multiple and contradictory perspectives (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000; Nieto, 1999);
- Using multiple voices to interrogate texts by asking questions such as “Whose voices are heard and whose are missing?” (Luke & Freebody, 1997)
- Paying attention to and seeking out the voices of those who have been silenced or marginalized (Harste et al., 2000);
- Examining competing narratives and writing counternarratives to dominant discourses (Farrell, 1998); and
- Making difference visible (Harste et al., 2000).

This dimension of critical literacy can also be an unconventional perspective for teachers to adopt. The “testing and right answer” heritage of schooling stands in direct opposition to examining conflicting perspectives—a process that usually does not produce neat and tidy conclusions.

The “testing and right answer” heritage of schooling stands in direct opposition to examining conflicting perspectives—a process that usually does not produce neat and tidy conclusions. In this dimension, we attempt to step outside of the personal to interrogate how sociopolitical systems and power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions.

Taking Action and Promoting Social Justice

This dimension is often perceived as the definition of critical literacy—yet one cannot take informed action against oppression or promote social justice without expanded...
understandings and perspectives gained from the other three dimensions. Here we use literacy to achieve social justice by

- Engaging in praxis—reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1972);

- Using language to exercise power to enhance everyday life and to question practices of privilege and injustice (Comber, 2001);

- Analyzing how language is used to maintain domination, how nondominant groups can gain access to dominant forms of language without devaluing their own language and culture, how diverse forms of language can be used as cultural resources, and how social action can change existing discourses (Janks, 2000); and

- Challenging and redefining cultural borders, encouraging students to be border crossers in order to understand others, and creating borderlands with diverse cultural resources (Giroux, 1993).

We have found this framework useful, especially as we observe teachers in their initial steps of implementing a critical literacy curriculum and ask, Which dimensions are the easiest starting points? Which come later? How do teachers' conceptions of a critical curriculum change over time?

**GETTING STARTED**

In January of 2000, 17 elementary teachers and one principal attended a daylong introductory workshop about critical literacy that we conducted with Chalmer Thompson, a colleague who studies racial identity theory. Topics covered included racial identity theory and children's literature, multiple viewpoints and social issues books, appropriate curriculum in elementary classrooms, and ways to address potential parental and community concerns. We emphasized using social issues books, believing they would provide support for newcomers and novices in beginning classroom conversations on real-life and controversial issues (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999). These books make difference visible, give voice to those traditionally silenced, explore dominant systems of meaning in our society, question why certain groups are positioned as others, and show how people can begin to take action on important issues (Harste et al., 2000). We also believed social issues books had the potential to invite teachers and students to move away from passive reading and become more actively engaged in texts (Lewison et al., 2000). We encouraged exploratory and collaborative conversations of texts, while recognizing that we did not attend to the equally important issue of student choice. At the end of the workshop, ten teachers joined the study, and three more joined at a later date.

During the first eight months, the professional development opportunities included two Saturday workshops, five study group meetings, and national conference attendance. Professional readings and classroom collections of children's books focused on social issues provided additional support for teachers to examine their assumptions regarding critical literacy. The teachers also agreed to let us make regular observations as they implemented critical literacy in their classrooms.

**The Teachers**

Participants filled out an initial questionnaire regarding their current understandings of and past experiences with critical literacy. Three categories characterized these teachers: newcomers to critical practices, novices, and those experienced in critical pedagogy. Six of the 13 teachers were newcomers. Half of this group had a vague idea about critical literacy based on a few study group readings and conversations with other teachers. The other half understood critical literacy as a way to explore cultural difference, discuss topics with "life applications," or promote dynamic literature discussion. These six newcomers had little or no experience...
with implementing critical pedagogy, yet they were extremely enthusiastic to “find out more.”

Five teachers were novices to critical practices. They had read more than the newcomers and understood critical literacy to be reading texts with a critical eye; considering multiple viewpoints; and having class discussions or projects related to race, class, power, gender, language, and social justice. Most of these teachers had implemented classroom activi-
ties during a designated “critical literacy time.” They were eager to learn more and move forward.

We characterized two teachers as experienced in critical pedagogy, having sophisticated visions of critical theory and practices. Spaces for critical conversations and action permeated different subject areas throughout their days. These teachers often served as mentors for others in the group. While the occurrences in these two classrooms were extremely enlightening in expanding our understandings of what a critical literacy curriculum can become, in this article we document the journeys of newcomers and novices, since their stories usually remain untold.

Data Sources and Analysis

We used a variety of data sources to aid in understanding the issues that newcomers and novices face when they begin implementing critical practices and what their practices actually look like. These sources included preworkshop questionnaires, postworkshop evaluations, teacher-authored progress reports, workshop field notes, transcripts of teacher talk at workshops, transcripts of study group sessions, classroom observation field notes, student artifacts, and transcripts of student literature circle discussions.

Using a grid, we classified teachers’ written conceptions of critical literacy over time, descriptions of classroom implementation, future curricular plans, and most helpful support structures. We coded

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Nancy’s Story: Connecting Literature Discussions with Critical Texts

Nancy’s journey of offering her fifth-grade students opportunities to read and reflect on issues of race, class, poverty, homelessness, and gender was initially mediated by her own beliefs of what it meant to engage students in meaningful literature discussions. While a newcomer to critical literacy, Nancy was knowledgeable about implementation structures to facilitate literature discussions. She had students assume various roles within discussions; she recognized the importance of children assuming ownership of discussions; and she strived to ask more interpretive questions of the children while encouraging them to ask their own questions. In the preworkshop questionnaire, Nancy wrote that critical literacy was “to bring up topics through literature with students that have real life application for them.” She shared that her primary focus over the past 30 years has been on “how to make reading and literature more a part of everything.” Nancy conceptualized critical literacy as encouraging students to participate in literature discussions that highlighted personal connections and relevancy. She wondered how to effectively integrate life texts into the classroom conversations.

Nancy’s practices as a newcomer to critical literacy slowly changed: the types of texts she and the students read, the types of questions asked, and the types of engagements the students participated in as they discussed the stories. Disrupting the commonplace seemed to be most evident as Nancy and the students actively participated in discussions around Fly Away Home (Bunting, 1991), Voices in the Park (Browne, 1998), and Randall’s Wall (Fenner,
1991). Less visible in the conversations and teaching practices was a focus on interrogating multiple perspectives, examining sociopolitical issues, and taking social action.

**Disrupting the Commonplace**

Nancy's experience with a critical literacy curriculum challenged her beliefs about children's responses to text, children's interest, and her own teaching practices. In this dimension, teachers and students focus on "seeing the everyday through new lenses," whether it is a teaching practice or an issue addressed in a piece of literature. Although Nancy was quite comfortable with literature discussions, she was surprised to discover the increased engagement of students when reading social issues texts. She reported:

"Reading social issues books had a profound effect on how much more involved the kids were with their conversations about books. They would even say, "Come on. Can't we have longer conversations? We didn't finish. We need more time to talk.""

Nancy described how reading and talking about the books enabled her students to "go from the surface kind of stuff to getting into the content." The unexpected student responses disrupted Nancy's perception of how interested her students could actually be about a text or in the discussion.

Students' beliefs and understandings of everyday life and practices were beginning to be disrupted as they read *Fly Away Home* and *Voices in the Park*. During a read-aloud of *Fly Away Home*, a story about a father and son living in an airport and trying to blend into the crowd because they are homeless, the students wondered why the father thought the "price was right" when living in the airport. One boy countered by mentioning how expensive items are at the airport. Another student shared a personal experience about seeing a homeless person in the airport. The discussion continued as students talked about not having a television to watch, but rather watching other people, and how "smart" the young boy in the story was for knowing how to blend in with other passengers. Throughout the discussion, there were moments of challenging mainstream American experiences (e.g., living with parents, watching television) and how homeless people might live and behave (e.g., having a job but not making enough money, having friends in the airport, being helpful by carrying passengers' luggage, blending in).

Later in the semester, Nancy read *Voices in the Park*—a story that brings together four different perspectives as each character experiences a day in a park. Some students examined the issue of class and poverty. They were surprised by the treatment various characters in the story received based on their appearance. The students wondered why the mother in the story would get so upset when her son wanted to play with a girl who did not look like them. One student connected these experiences to his own life by commenting that in some instances children meet other people that their mothers do not like. These were glimpses of students beginning to question status and class in a community.

The dimension of disrupting the commonplace emerged in significant ways in Nancy's classroom. She provided experiences with the texts that have the potential to challenge commonly held beliefs and assumptions. Her teaching practices were challenged as she aimed to provide more explicit connections between the students' lives and texts. And the students were engaged in conversations that asked them to consider the critical issues addressed in these texts.

**Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints**

This dimension focused on hearing multiple and sometimes contradictory viewpoints by asking, "Whose voices are heard and not heard?" There were times when Nancy and the students grappled with multiple perspectives and with endings in some of the books that were not simple or well defined. *Voices in the Park* was one of the first opportunities the students had to entertain

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multiple perspectives. They were interested in how the author distinguished the different voices by using different fonts. As with disrupting the commonplace, a focus on the text structure was initially important to students. They revisited the text a second time and considered how the characters in the story viewed the day at the park in different ways. However, students kept the discussion at a relatively surface level by talking about happiness, sadness, and meanness without extended discussion of why these characters might be reacting in these particular ways.
Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues

Nancy’s students did not regularly engage in discussions that questioned the ways in which they were positioned by larger social structures. However, while listening to Randall’s Wall, they heard how a young boy is ostracized by his classmates because he is unclean and smells due to no running water in his squalid house. Nancy asked the children to consider what might happen if Randall joined their classroom. Their responses were similar to what occurred in the story. They discussed not befriending Randall for fear of jeopardizing their status with peers. Although the students were positioned by a peer culture that does not enable one to “go against the accepted norm,” they were also incredibly honest in their reactions to the situation. With Nancy making this issue more transparent, the students began to uncover how they are constructed by larger power structures.

Nancy’s involvement with sociopolitical issues surfaced in the teacher study group meetings. After reading articles by Alfie Kohn and One Size Fits Few (Ohanian, 1999), Nancy shared her own concerns about standardized testing. She and other group members talked about being a four-star school, how their scores have dropped, and how difficult it is to meet the needs of individual children when the focus is on standards. For Nancy, the opportunities to read and talk about these issues were important to her own growth as a teacher enacting critical practices.

In a spring study group meeting, Nancy and others read Making Justice our Project (Edelsky, 1999). Nancy questioned how language was being used to position readers in particular ways. She speculated how the jargon in a few of the chapters marginalized some readers because the writing style and vocabulary did not seem accessible to classroom teachers. In these instances, Nancy focused on how language and systems of power shape and define responses and reactions.

Taking a Stand and Promoting Social Justice

The dimension of taking a stand and promoting social justice was not visible in Nancy’s beginning steps toward implementing a critical literacy curriculum. The conversations about the texts remained centered for the most part on text structures and personal connections. Yet, this isn’t to say that Nancy was not aware of moving in these directions. Nancy reflected that she wanted to continue using the social issues books to further her awareness and to question the status quo in the stories.

Nancy, as did other newcomers we observed, began her journey with critical literacy by wanting students to make more personal and real-life connections to the texts they were reading. She offered students opportunities to read and engage with social issues texts, encouraging students to consider multiple perspectives and challenge commonly held assumptions and beliefs. She was opening conversation space for students to address significant issues. Moreover, as Nancy and the other newcomers in the group began examining what critical literacy is and how it is enacted in classroom settings, they enlarged the “space of the possible” (Davis & Sumara, 1999).

Kevin’s Story: Exploring Multiple Perspectives

Kevin’s initial conceptions positioned him as a novice teacher with a broader understanding of critical pedagogy than newcomers. His initial definition, jotted down in phrases, described critical literacy as “reading with a critical eye” to see the everyday through new lenses, standing in the place of others by “considering multiple perspectives,” and “discussing social injustices and strategies to improve situations.” Kevin described efforts in his primary multilanguage classroom (K-2) to engage in “in-depth” discussions of any texts read and noted that some classroom conversations had also “briefly touched on social issues” including age, race, and gender. With his foundational beliefs and classroom experiences, Kevin came to the project interested in learning about new titles, strategies for using social issues texts, and how to establish a classroom climate for discussing social topics.

At the end of the first workshop, Kevin felt more comfortable discussing issues of social injustices and oppression with six-through eight-year-olds. However, he was concerned about the “appropriateness” of some materials specifically related to violence.

Kevin’s classroom practice was similar to the practices of other novice teachers in that disrupting the commonplace was evident in their classrooms prior to this project. Building on this foundation, questioning texts from multiple perspectives became the most visible critical literacy dimension in Kevin’s classroom. Also present in his and other novice teachers’ classrooms were initial steps toward having students interrogate events from a sociopolitical stance. Less visible in these classrooms was
Children's Literature on Taking Social Action

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Friends from the Other Side: Amigos del otro lado*. Illus. C. Mendez. (Children's Book Press, 1993). This realistic portrayal of life in the Río Grande Valley describes Prieta's efforts to stand up for a young boy who recently arrived from the other side of the border.

Bunting, Eve. *Your Move*. Illus. J. Ransome. (Harcourt Brace, 1998). James and his six-year-old brother get involved with a local gang but decline membership when they realize the importance of taking a personal stand against vandalism and violence.

Coles, Robert. *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. Illus. G. Ford. (Scholastic, 1995). Ruby Bridges, who at age six was one of the first African Americans to attend an all-white school, demonstrates the power of conviction and courage as she faces racism.

Cronin, Doris. *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*. Illus. B. Lewin. (Simon & Schuster, 2000). The cows on Farmer Brown's farm learn the power of writing and taking action as they peacefully protest for better working conditions.

Fleischman, Paul. *Seedfolks*. (HarperCollins, 1997). Thirteen residents of an urban neighborhood tell stories of immigration, prejudice, violence, and differing viewpoints as they build community by transforming an empty lot into a garden.


Myers, Christopher. *Wings*. (Scholastic, 2000). Ikarus Jackson, a new boy in school, celebrates his differences despite ridicule from classmates and adults until one quiet girl musters the strength to befriend him.


Rose, Deborah. *The People Who Hugged the Trees*. Illus. B. Säflund. (Roberts Rinehart, 1990). When the Maharajah's axmen come to cut down the forest that protects her village from monsoon rains and desert sandstorms, Amrita clings to her favorite tree, compelling the villagers to join in saving the forest from destruction.

Wallis, Velma. *Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage, and Survival*. (Harper, 1993). After leaving two old women to die during a harsh winter, a wandering Athabascan tribe hunts unsuccessfully for food and eventually is saved by the two women, who used their wits and experience to survive and prosper.

—Mitzi Lewison, Amy Seely Flint, and Katie Van Sluys

the dimension of taking action to promote social justice.

Disrupting the Commonplace

Following the first workshop, Kevin introduced his students to eight social issues texts. These books were used to disrupt the commonplace and serve as points of departure for critical conversations that explored real issues and facilitated stepping outside of students’ usual modes of understanding. Kevin read Karen Hesse’s novel *Just Juice* (1998), a story about a young girl’s family as they confront issues of poverty, the challenges of literacy, and their impending eviction from their rural home. Students linked Juice’s life with that of Little Willie and his grandfather—two main characters in Gardiner’s story *Stone Far* (1980) who faced losing their home due to unpaid taxes. These books and con-

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versations invited students to move beyond traditional forms of comprehension and pay attention to underlying social issues.

**Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints**

In Kevin’s classroom practice and reflective talk, considering multiple viewpoints was a primary focal point for enacting critical curriculum. In one study group session, another teacher shared an account of using *Tomás and the Library Lady* (Mora, 1997) with her students. The story addresses migrant life, poverty, inequities, identity, language, and the power of literacy, as Tomás and his family move between Iowa and Texas. Kevin thought this book would be an important addition to his curriculum because it related to his students’ experiences about having similar struggles with moving and making new friends. They questioned the fairness of Tomás’s perpetual moving and getting books from the dump. One student told how she, like Tomás, often was the translator for an adult family member.

In another example, students took on various positions in an environmental role-play based on a magazine article that described the plight of fish dying from polluted river water. Kevin assigned students the roles of factory workers, environmentalists, citizens, and a judge in a court. The students debated the benefits and consequences of their proposed solutions, including moving the factory, shutting it down, cleaning the water, changing chemical formulas, and punishing the factory owners. As one child proposed moving the factory, another pointed out that in order to do that they would have to take the factory apart—something they didn’t consider to be a viable option. In the ensuing conversation another child suggested that they “should stop the factory,” only to learn that “factories make stuff that people need,” so shutting it down might not be the best option either.

**Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues**

In Kevin’s classroom, we saw children start to question how power was enacted in their lives. This was most evident in discussions about fairness. In written reflections, some students questioned why girls always got to sit in certain chairs during independent reading time. Another student encouraged her peers to consider how they are positioned in a larger world context by writing a memoir of moving to the United States from Eastern Europe. She wrote about the difficulties of learning a new language and how she navigated American life in and out of school. In making her writing public, she pushed others to go beyond their personal experiences and consider the issue of language in sociopolitical contexts. Children began asking why some people knew other languages and “How come we only know English?” Students’ questions hinted at understanding power relationships and how language impacts access to American life.

Students also interrogated the issue of Japanese internment camps while reading *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993), a story set during World War II. It relates a young boy’s struggle to become a more accepted ball player, as well as questioning the prejudices that surround internment. Students struggled to understand why Japanese Americans were imprisoned in the first place. Kevin wondered about discussing internment camps with his young students and if the kids ever really “got it.”

In study group, we saw evidence of Kevin’s growing awareness of how sociopolitical systems and power relationships impact his teaching. He frequently shared classroom vignettes that questioned how learning is measured, what counts as knowledge, and how standards and testing impact and position children in their school and larger worlds. He discussed issues regarding high-stakes testing with his colleagues, questioned proposed “shortened” versions of state tests, and examined issues of testing job performance to testing. Evidence of this dimension of critical literacy seems strongest in Kevin’s work beyond the classroom. He was beginning to open up spaces for his students and himself to interrogate sociopolitical positionings.

**Taking a Stand and Promoting Social Justice**

Social action efforts in Kevin’s classroom are less evident than the other dimensions of critical literacy. However, social action runs strong in his life. Kevin is an actor, rather than a spectator (Freire, 1972). As a member of a Teachers Applying Whole Language group, Kevin worked on a campaign challenging high-stakes testing. He and other teachers distributed professional articles and bumper stickers (“A child is so much more than a test score”) to all teachers and administrators in the school corporation. He met with school administrators to contest standardized testing of young children and spoke

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Rethinking Schools

The Rethinking Schools network offers tremendous support to teachers interested in critical literacy and social justice. The network was begun by teachers and works for reform through activism and by publishing educational materials. The newspaper Rethinking Schools provides thoughtful analysis by teachers on educational issues. Insightful authors who are regular contributors include Linda Christensen, Bill Bigelow, and Bob Peterson. A few of the issues highlighted by Rethinking Schools include:

- Segregation: Alive and Well (Fall 2001)
- Examining Media Violence and Stereotypes (Spring 2001)
- Girls, Worms and Body Image (Spring 2000)
- Bilingual Education (Summer 1999; Winter 1999)

Special publications are also available, such as Linda Christensen’s book Reading, Writing and Rising Up (Rethinking Schools, 2000), which includes critical literacy activities that can be adapted to many levels. From the Rethinking Schools website, www.rethinkingschools.org, additional links are provided to organizations that can help students and teachers read critically.

—Roxanne Henkin

to the local community as part of a forum problematizing high-stakes testing. Kevin took a stand and worked for social justice.

Kevin’s classroom practices, like those of other novices in this study, were typically positioned in the dimensions of disrupting the commonplace and interrogating multiple viewpoints. We saw evidence that Kevin’s students began to interrogate sociopolitical positioning by going beyond the personal and focusing on language and power relationships. The dimension of taking action and promoting social justice was less evident in the classrooms of novices to critical pedagogy.

**NEXT STEPS, SUPPORT, AND DIFFICULT QUESTIONS**

In moving toward enacting critical practices, most teachers are faced with a continuing examination and revision of long-held beliefs. Their initial efforts toward implementing a critical literacy curriculum are often shadowed by hesitations and uncertainties of what critical literacy looks like in classrooms and what is appropriate for elementary classrooms in terms of materials, texts, and discussions.

**Next Steps**

As Nancy’s fifth-grade students read and discussed various texts, she realized that she needed a more complex understanding of critical literacy. She commented that her conceptions of critical literacy were still shallow and that she wanted to continue learning as much as she could. She also wanted to invite students to think about what is fair and not fair in their lives and to see how this viewpoint applied to some of the previously read books, as well as to new stories she planned to read. As a vision for future practice, Nancy wants her students to understand that texts are culturally, socially, politically, and historically constructed and situated.

In looking ahead, Kevin intends to “be more deliberate in addressing [critical] issues throughout the year.” He wants to find ways to have students “talking and writing about power issues and inequality” in all areas of the curriculum, not just at a particular time of the day. Believing that taking action develops over time, Kevin plans to encourage students to continue their work by focusing on environmental concerns and to support their new interest in investigating shelter conditions for animals.

**Teacher Support**

Nancy and Kevin attributed their growth over an eight-month period to the two Saturday workshops and the five study group sessions that were part of this project. The workshop components that were most instrumental to growth were hearing other teachers’ stories of implementing critical practices, getting new information on different aspects of critical literacy, participating in literature circles using social issues books, and reflecting on troublesome issues with peers. Having copies of social issues books for their classrooms was also a significant support for teachers. Important but of less impact were attending national literacy conferences, hearing peers speak at local forums, and having observers in the classroom.

For the future, teachers at all levels—newcomers, novices, and experienced—are requesting more time for conversation and reflection after each workshop session, more book discussions, and the ability to view and discuss videotapes of peers as they implement critical pedagogy in their classrooms. The teachers also felt a pressing need to expand
their understandings of historical events and their abilities to have students inquire into the complicated issues underlying unfair working conditions, the closing of local factories, unchecked suburban development, and other sociopolitical issues. In short, they felt a strong need to further their education. This speaks to the tensions that critical pedagogy presented by expanding curriculum content beyond the knowledge base of many elementary teachers. We’ve observed a real hunger for gaining an understanding of sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and counternarratives to both historical and current events.

**Difficult Questions**

All of the teachers reported how difficult it was to know how to respond when they overheard disparaging remarks made by students to peers such as “That’s so gay,” “I hate black people,” or “You are fuzzy and black.” Equally difficult were the questions that students brought up during class discussions, including “Why would the Boy Scouts discriminate and not allow homosexuals into their group?” “Why did we hurt the Indians?” or “Why are there a lot of African Americans in sports like basketball?” One teacher had questions about how to use some of the social issues books when she had only one African American student and the rest of her kids were white. And finally, another teacher wanted to know how to respond to an adult who starts a question or statement with, “I’m not a racist, but . . .” and then makes a very stereotyped or racist remark. These difficult questions led to stimulating and helpful workshop discussions as well as an e-mail discussion group.

**WHAT WE LEARNED**

The stories of Nancy and Kevin illustrate the varying visibility of the four dimensions of critical literacy as they implemented a curriculum focused on social issues. For teachers such as Nancy who were newcomers to the ideas and pedagogy of critical literacy, we observed their practices mostly falling in the dimension of disrupting commonplace beliefs. Newcomers were beginning to initiate critical conversation around books and to encourage children to interrogate everyday beliefs and practices. With novices such as Kevin we saw more opportunities for children to interrogate multiple perspectives and focus on sociopolitical issues. These novices to critical literacy encouraged children to move beyond personal connections and challenged them to better understand the ways in which larger sociopolitical structures position people in the world. For newcomers, novices, and experienced teachers, the support mechanisms, especially the workshops and study groups, contributed to their evolving visions of critical literacy and how it might be implemented in classrooms.

Directions we did not see taken up by newcomers or novices involved examining popular culture, media, and critical language study. This absence was due in part to limited workshop time spent on these aspects of critical literacy. In future workshops we plan to address the ways in which language and popular culture position us in particular ways as raced, classed, and gendered people.

The four dimensions of critical literacy—disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple perspectives, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking a stand toward social justice—provided a lens to critique our own practice as workshop facilitators, examining which dimensions we privileged and which we spent little time on. Additionally, the dimensions provided a framework for examining teacher beliefs and practices to distinguish the varied ways in which teachers conceptualized and enacted critical literacy. These dimensions also enabled us to see where teachers were most comfortable starting and how their practices changed over time. We hope the dimensions aid other teachers and researchers in documenting tensions, understandings, and growth in critical pedagogy.

**Children’s Books Cited**


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Author Biographies

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**CALL FOR 2003 ORBIS PICTUS NOMINATIONS**

The National Council of Teachers of English announces a call for nominations for the 2003 Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children. To recommend an outstanding children's nonfiction book published in 2002, please send a letter to the Orbis Pictus Committee Chair, Carolyn J. Lott, 215 S. 5th Street E., Missoula, MT 59801-2717. Please include the following information: the author's name, book title, publisher, copyright date, and a short description of what you liked about the book. Nominations for the 2003 Orbis Pictus Award must be received by November 30, 2002. Further information can be found at www.ncte.org/elem/orbispictus.

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