

## Critical literacy: Promoting equity in early childhood settings

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*As globalisation accelerates, the resulting increase in diversity within the overall population brings with it an increased responsibility to meet the needs of all children within early childhood settings. For teachers, this includes an awareness of the importance of equitable practices and the need to play an active role in creating welcoming and inclusive learning environments. A principal aspect of this is addressing deficit thinking around difference, which can operate as part of the hidden curriculum in educational settings. One significant and effective way to achieve a more equitable learning environment is through the use of critical literacy; a pedagogical approach which promotes the questioning of taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions and allows for all worldviews and ways of knowing and being to be recognised and valued. This approach sits within the theoretical framework of critical theory, which seeks to address injustices within society. This paper will examine critical literacy, primarily through the lens of Freire and other critical theorists, to examine ways teachers might adopt a more just approach to literacy practices in the classroom.*

### Critical literacy and conscientisation

The origins of critical literacy can be traced back to the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who viewed literacy as a means for learners to read not only the word but also the world in which they live (Freire, 1985). In unison with critical theory, Freire supported a focus on theory and practice in the fight against political and social oppression (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009), a divergence from traditional views where a clear distinction is drawn between the two. His approach to understanding the world, however, is essentially a dialectical one and Roberts (2000) notes that, “thinking dialectically is for Freire equivalent to thinking *critically*: it means being constantly open to further questions, and to the possibility – indeed probability – of current assumptions being revised, repudiated, or overturned” (p. 37).

This openness to new ideas fits closely with Freire’s (1996) rejection of the banking concept of education, which he saw as a form of oppression. Instead, Freire promoted the idea that adopting a critical pedagogy allowed teachers to assist their students to gain an understanding of how current injustices are a result of historically created social structures and that, through use of their social agency, the oppressed had the power to transform these structures and to bring about change. For example, Freire believed that he could not teach the underprivileged to read without also teaching them about the conditions that oppressed them. In this way, learning to read was preceded by gaining an understanding of their world. As he stated, “words should be laden with the meaning of the people’s existential experience” and express “their actual language, their anxieties, fears, demands, and dreams” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 24). In line with this, Freire viewed education not as something neutral, but as a political act that either domesticates or liberates learners.

A pivotal concept in Freire’s thinking is the process of humanisation, which relates to our becoming more fully human. Freire points out that both humanisation and dehumanisation are possible and that we have a responsibility to humanise both ourselves and others (Freire, 1996). However, for the oppressed, this becomes a difficult task as they are not afforded the freedom to do so by their oppressors. Added to this is the dualistic situation of the oppressed who may not wish to change the social order, due to having internalised the consciousness of the oppressor and wishing to resemble them (Freire, 1996). McLaren (1988) points out that this occurs through the process of hegemony, whereby “the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression” (p. 67). In this scenario, both the oppressor and the oppressed become dehumanised; a dilemma which Freire (1996) believed could only be addressed through engaging in praxis. The humanising process,

therefore, requires a situation where all people are able to engage in dialogue with others (Roberts, 2000). This is where critical literacy can play an important role in building understandings and humanising others within educational settings.

In order for this to happen, it is important for teachers to gain an understanding of the concept of education for conscientisation, which is the essence of Freire's theory of liberation. This is a process whereby people develop an awareness of the reality which shapes their lives and their ability to transform this. Freire sets out three steps in this model; intransitive consciousness; semi-transitive consciousness; and critical transitivity, better known as critical consciousness (Shor, 1992).

The first step, intransitive consciousness, occurs when an "individual accepts or celebrates the status quo, has the most closed mind, and lives in political disempowerment" (Shor, 1992, p. 126). In effect, a person rejects the idea that they have personal agency or that they have the power to transform either their own situation or that of society. It essentially encompasses a fatalistic approach to life (Shor, 1992).

The next step, semi-transitive consciousness, relates to "one-dimensional, short-term thinking that leads to acting on an isolated problem, ignoring root causes and long-term solutions, and often creating other problems because the social system underlying a problem is not addressed" (Shor, 1992, p. 127). In other words, an individual with semi-transitive consciousness sees the world in a disconnected way and is unable to view life and society as a whole. While they may believe that humans can change things, their approach focuses on addressing things in a fragmented and isolated manner. As Shor (1992) states, "this unintegrated view of the world does not perceive how separate parts of society condition each other or how a whole social system is implicated in producing single effects in any one part" (Shor, 1992, pp. 126-127).

The final step, critical consciousness, or critical transitivity, on the other hand, allows people to "make broad connections between individual experience and social issues, between single problems and the larger social system" (Shor, 1992, p. 127), resulting in an appreciation of how society is formed and how it might be transformed. This involves recognition of the power exerted by dominant groups within society, an understanding of how these elite groups control the economic system, and how this power can be democratised to bring about societal change (Shor, 1992). A key aspect here is the notion that society is not a 'finished' product, but is something that humans can change.

Four interconnected qualities relate to reaching this state of critical consciousness (Shor, 1992). The first of these is power awareness; the recognition that human action makes society; therefore, human action can transform it. The second is the development of critical literacy, whereby texts are actively analysed for deeper meanings and understandings. Shor (1992) then speaks of permanent desocialisation, which relates to both gaining an understanding of and challenging the limits placed on human development by political and social forces. This involves the recognition that transforming your own life is closely connected to bringing about social change. The final quality is that of self-education, which involves using transformative education to engage in both critical thought and cooperative action (Shor, 1992).

These are complex concepts and it should be noted that critical pedagogy does not relate to any specific techniques or fixed methods of teaching. In fact, any formulaic approach to teaching and learning is totally at odds with Freire's notion of what might be considered an education for liberation. Rather, critical pedagogy is based on teachers and students developing a critical perspective of education and society, enabling students to use this increased awareness to bring about social transformation (Shor, 1987). As Roberts (2000) points out, in Freire's view, "knowledge is not recollected through philosophical thought but *created* through reflexive action in a social world" (p. 39). What Freire's pedagogical and liberating theory of conscientisation, does highlight, however, is the potential of humans to transform

and empower both themselves and the society in which they live. And, as noted by Shor (1987), one of the key qualities in reaching critical consciousness is the development of critical literacy. This is in line with Freire's (1996) belief that literacy is a key factor in overcoming the oppression of disadvantaged groups. As McLaren (1988) notes, "all texts, written, spoken, or otherwise represented, constitute ideological weapons capable of enabling certain groups to solidify their power through acts of linguistic hegemony" (p. 218). This observation underlines the potential of literature to either empower or disempower others.

### Critical literacy and early childhood education

To date, the use of critical literacy in early childhood settings has been largely underutilised; however, a growing number of researchers are now highlighting its value in promoting critical thinking in young children, particularly in relation to social and cultural issues (Kim, 2016; Mackey & de Vocht-van Alphen, 2016; Souto-Manning, 2017; Vasquez, 2007). Research shows that children begin to engage in social classification and stereotyping in their early years, so this makes early childhood a crucial time for teachers to address aspects of inequality or social injustice in their education settings (Rhodes, Leslie, Bianchi, & Chalik, 2018). As noted by Hyland (2010), children internalise social messages about what is valued and not valued in their communities from a very young age. From a teaching perspective, addressing these inequities requires an exploration of existing power relationships, ongoing reflection, and the adoption of a culturally responsive pedagogy (Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012); the latter highlighting the need for teachers to recognise that they are also cultural beings and, as such, never neutral in their attitudes towards others (Vasquez, 2004). As early childhood teachers in New Zealand are predominantly white, monolingual females, this can present challenges when confronted with multiple aspects of diversity within the classroom (Souto-Manning, 2017), making critical literacy a valuable approach to widen the perspectives of both teachers and children.

### Critical literacy in the classroom

Critical literacy encourages active discussion and questioning of the status quo and should be grounded in the lives and experiences of the children. For teachers, this means incorporating a critical perspective into their pedagogy in order to "help children understand the social and political issues around them" (Vasquez, 2004, p. 1). While some may believe this is unachievable at this stage of development, a study conducted with preschoolers aged three to five years, found that teachers were able to orientate children to social justice issues through the use of guided questions when introducing a text and by scaffolding their learning through open-ended questions and active listening (Hawkins, 2014). The findings also highlighted the importance of equal and interactive dialogue between teachers and children (Hawkins, 2014). As Freire (1996) notes, "dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants" (p. 70). For meaningful dialogue to take place there needs to be the opportunity for multiple viewpoints and experiences to be explored through a range of different lenses (Harwood, 2008).

In relation to the implementation of critical literacy in the classroom, Lee (2020) outlines four dimensions teachers can incorporate into their practice to encourage change. The first of these involves disrupting the commonplace, whereby stories are used to challenge stereotypical images and negative attitudes towards others. Hawkins (2014) study provides an example of this in action when the reading of a story on ethnicity resulted in a young girl shifting from the view that she could only be friends with children who had the same skin colour to one where she realised that she could be friends with everyone.

The second dimension involves interrogating multiple viewpoints by engaging in dialogue around personal and cultural perspectives. An example which encompasses this dimension is the book *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne (1999), which uses four different voices to portray contrasting versions of the same walk in the park. Through interaction with

the text, a teacher can use stories such as this to stimulate children into thinking about their own attitudes towards friendship, gender, the unjust treatment of others and many other social issues. Examining alternative versions of traditional fairy tales, such as *Cinderella* (Harwood, 2008), or alternative views of gender roles, such as those highlighted in *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch & Martchenko, 1980), can also be used to encourage discussion around gender stereotyping and common perceptions of beauty.

The third dimension is a less obvious one as it focuses on socio-political issues in order to gain a broader understanding of the context in which education is placed, particularly in relation to social justice issues that affect children's lives (Lee, 2020). This is in line with the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979), which highlights how different systems impact, either directly or indirectly, on a child's potential learning and development. While this may seem like a difficult concept for young children to grasp, approaching relevant topics in a sensitive and age-appropriate manner can promote valuable discussion on issues such as poverty, multiculturalism, sustainable practices and so on (Chafel & Neitzel, 2012; Comber, 2013; Croft, 2017). This allows children to make sense of the wider context in which they live and their responses provide teachers with useful insights into children's thinking on societal issues.

Closely connected to this is the final dimension, which involves taking action to promote social justice (Lee, 2020). This can occur through changes in attitudes and a greater understanding of others however, young children are also capable of instigating and taking part in actions to benefit others. This could be as simple as helping to recycle, or encouraging their parents to use sustainable wraps on their food. The story of *Michael Recycle* by Ellie Bethel (2008) provides a useful basis for these kinds of discussions, along with suggestions on how to bring about positive change. On the other hand, it could be something more complex, like writing a petition to local authorities or helping clean up a local park.

As noted earlier, there are many books that can be used to develop children's thinking. Critical literacy, however, requires teachers to carefully select relevant books and to use purposeful prompts to stimulate discussion (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012); necessitating a more intentional approach to story time. It is also important for children to see themselves and their communities reflected in this literature (Bennett, Gunn, Gayle-Evans, Barrera, & Leung, 2018), such as in stories like *Tu Meke Tui* by Malcolm Clarke (2018), which uses recognisable New Zealand birds to convey the message that we should appreciate differences in others.

The prompts teachers use can include specific questions raised when introducing a book and use of the illustrations to examine aspects such as what the illustrator is portraying, what the children think is important in the picture, and how this makes them feel. The key aspect here is for teachers to allow children sufficient time to express and discuss their views in order to gain a better understanding of the perspectives and circumstances of others and to develop their own questions and ideas (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012; Vasquez, 2007). This requires a move away from just reading a story at mat times to a more active discussion.

### The benefits of critical literacy

Research indicates that some teachers hold back from engaging in critical literacy because they believe that young children will not gain much from these texts, or because they fear that reading books about social issues could be seen as controversial (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005). However, as Norris, Lucas and Prudhoe (2012) note, "a curriculum that focuses on issues of diversity, such as race, culture, language and gender, and sees children's questions as important, will be both socially just and culturally responsive" (p. 60). Although at times this may involve challenging questions and a certain level of discomfort for teachers, Kim, Park and An (2018) found that using the context of stories and characters to engage in interactive discussions with children was a safe and effective way to discuss difficult topics like economic inequality, social class and other aspects of inequality. Children are competent and capable learners

(Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) and can begin the process of critically engaging with texts from a young age. Providing an empowering environment in which children are given agency “to create and act on their own ideas” and “to make decisions and judgments on matters that relate to them” (MoE, 2017, p. 18) is a key aspect in stimulating their overall development.

Another key benefit of critical literacy is that it provides an opportunity for children to examine their own beliefs and values in relation to those of others. Deconstructing different elements within a text promotes conversations around a range of different discourses, providing children with the opportunity to enhance their own critical thinking (Harwood, 2008). This provides them with lifelong tools that will enable them to challenge biases related to social, political or cultural issues that they may encounter in later life (Giroux, 1987).

## **Conclusion**

Literature has long been recognised as a key way to broaden children’s thinking; however, critical literacy takes this a step further and encourages children to engage with multiple world-views on a range of cultural and societal issues, such as culture, language, social standing and gender. To be most effective, discussions around texts need to be grounded in the lives and experiences of the children and involve active and equal dialogue between children and teachers.

Critically engaging with key messages contained within these texts provides children with the opportunity to examine dominant discourses surrounding diversity and provides them with the skills they need to challenge deficit views of others. This supports the view of children as competent, capable individuals, able to engage in active dialogue and to form their own views and ideas.

To support the development of critical literacy, teachers need to engage in an exploration of existing power relationships, carry out ongoing reflection and adopt a culturally responsive, equity pedagogy. Embracing critical literacy in the classroom will allow both teachers and children to act as agents of change in bringing about a more inclusive and socially just society.

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