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Stimulating Critical Literacy Consciousness

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Abstract

This story from the field recounts how, after being an educator for over ten years, I became aware that I had been responsible for misrepresenting information to my first-grade students. This difficult realization shook me to the core, but it also became the impetus for me to learn about critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Both of these educational practices align with my faith and have been transformational to my teaching. As a result, I am able to teach my pre-service and graduate students how to instruct in more socially-just ways.

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Abstract

This story from the field recounts how, after being an educator for over ten years, I became aware that I had been responsible for misrepresenting information to my first-grade students. This difficult realization shook me to the core, but it also became the impetus for me to learn about critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Both of these educational practices align with my faith and have been transformational to my teaching. As a result, I am able to teach my pre-service and graduate students how to instruct in more socially-just ways.

“Awareness is like the sun, when it shines on things they are transformed.” Thich Nhat Hahn

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2008) asserted that the majority of United States teachers do not know history, and teachers cannot teach what they do not know. I discovered both of these statements to be true in the way I learn most of my important lessons – the hard way.

My first year of teaching in a suburban first grade classroom, I was given the curricula and timelines for the content to be taught. The end of September into October, the social studies curriculum included a brief unit on Christopher Columbus. My knowledge about Columbus was typical of most United States’ students – namely, he had three ships and was looking for an express route to India to obtain gold and spices. On his journey, he landed in America, thought he was in India, and called the people who greeted him Indians. The lesson: Christopher Columbus was a brave explorer who discovered America.

In teaching the unit that first year, I learned Columbus was a much more nuanced person with human imperfections. For example, Columbus was determined; over a ten-year timespan, he went three times to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand asking for ships to

sail to India. Columbus was turned down the first two times but would not take no for an answer. Columbus was dishonest. On the journey, the crew grew agitated and considered a mutiny because the expedition took longer than expected. So, Columbus changed the dates on the log to make it appear they had been at sea for a shorter time than they actually were. My students pondered whether or not this was deceitful. We also examined his motivations; he was looking for a shorter route to obtain gold and spices to make money. Aside from these flaws, the books we read in our study of Columbus portrayed him as a hero. I taught this unit and this narrative over the next seven years to many different groups of children.

Some years later, I became a reading specialist and enrolled in a doctoral program. At this time, I learned much more about Christopher Columbus; mainly, he started the trans-Atlantic slave trade and initiated the genocide of the Taínos people. The king and queen financed Columbus’ expedition with the stipulation he would repay their investment with gold, silver, and spices. Upon first meeting the Taínos on the island of Hispaniola, Columbus noted the Arawaks [Taínos] were handsome, smart and kind. “When you ask for something they have, they never say no. To the contrary, they offer to share with anyone” (Konig, 1991, p. 62). The Taínos’ generosity shocked Columbus. When the Santa Maria was shipwrecked, the Taínos labored for hours saving the crew and cargo. Columbus wrote he was astounded nothing had been stolen.

Despite the Taínos’ benevolence, Columbus needed to repay the king and queen. So, every three months, all people 14 years of age and older were commanded to fill a hawk bell with gold and bring it to Columbus, whereupon the person was given a manufactured token, stamped with the month to hang around the neck. Anyone caught without a token had their hands cut off. Columbus landed in the Bahamas, not India; there was little gold. Thus, once the Taínos handed

over what meager gold they had, they were forced to wade in streams as they attempted to wash gold dust from pebbles – an impossible task. Some Taínos fled to the mountains, but dogs were sent to hunt down them. Once captured, they were killed as examples to prevent others from running. Columbus soon realized he was not receiving the gold he desperately needed, so he captured 500 Taínos to bring back to Spain as slaves. 300 Taínos died at sea. Columbus made three more trips to acquire more slaves and gold. Over ten years, the Taínos' population decreased from an estimated 8 million to 60 thousand (Konig, 1991).

Upon learning a more comprehensive account of the history surrounding Columbus, I was stunned and appalled. How was it the Taínos and their experiences were excluded from the history I was taught, and why was Columbus portrayed as a hero? Since I was unaware of this history, I could not teach what I did not know. I had to live with the fact that I was responsible for perpetuating a myth and an incomplete history to all those children. As someone who is passionate about truth and justice, this was extremely difficult for me, but it was also one of my best learning experiences. In this story, I discuss how my Columbus experience led me to critical pedagogy and critical literacy, and how these practices have been transformational to my own learning and have helped me to teach in more socially-just ways.

Social Injustices in Education

The Pledge of Allegiance, recited daily in most classrooms, proclaims liberty and justice for all. Yet within the U.S. school system, there is abundant evidence to the contrary; students outside the dominant culture in race, class, and language are underserved. For example, in Philadelphia, where 86 percent of students are of color and a majority live in poverty (School District of Philadelphia, 2016), many teachers must buy school supplies such as paper, crayons, and notebooks. Some teachers, due to severe budget cuts, must provide toilet paper (Lubrano, 2013). Not providing such basic staples such as toilet paper sends a strong message and demeans the dignity of teachers and students. Meanwhile, not 15 miles away, students attending Radnor High School, where 76% of the student population are affluent and White, have every necessity including staffed libraries, nurses, and counselors. Moreover, each sophomore and junior is issued a school iPad for personal academic use (Graham, 2014).

With such disparities, it is not a surprise that there is an educational achievement gap. Students of color consistently attain lower literacy levels compared to their White peers; this gap worsens as students progress through school (Niето, 2010). In fourth and eighth grades, the gap is equivalent to two grade levels. By twelfth grade the gap has doubled; Black and Hispanic twelfth grade students perform at the same reading level as eighth grade White students. Further, students are offered a mainstream, Euro-centric curriculum that excludes or marginalizes the narratives of people of color (e.g. the Taínos) (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Spring, 2016). Knowledge is presented as “neutral and objective” and become facts and concepts to be memorized to later recall for a test. Rarely are students encouraged to examine and question the assumptions, values, and nature of the knowledge they are expected to know (Banks, 2016).

As a result, students of color react, resist, and rebel (Grant, 2015) against school curricula and conditions that “negate their histories, cultures, and day to day experiences” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 121). Encountering academic disengagement, students drop out of school. Dropping out makes it difficult to find and keep a job, results in lower wage earnings and a higher probability of relying on public assistance and encountering the criminal justice system (Levin & Rouse, 2012). Black, Hispanic, and foreign-born students are more likely to drop out than Whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). This is problematic, as it is estimated that by 2060, people of color will make up 57% of the nation's population (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012). The roots of critical pedagogy and critical literacy begin by addressing the very basic inequities in education that exist for underserved populations.

Approaches to Education

Critical pedagogy is an educational approach to learning that promotes awareness of social oppressions and injustices. The purpose is to examine, challenge, and transform conditions to create a more just and equal society (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Prior to my doctoral studies, I had not heard of critical pedagogy. But my Columbus experience meant I was actively seeking answers and was ready to learn more about an educational approach that actively questioned hegemonic narratives. I was finally open to understanding that I had been educated in a mono-cultural, Eurocentric school system that supported uncritical thinking abili-

ties. Freire (2008) coined it as the “banking concept of education” (p. 72). Ultimately, I taught the same way I was taught. In this model, the teacher selects the curriculum and content (or is given it by a school district) and transfers it to the students. The student’s role is not to question content or ideas but to accept concepts as truth.

In the realm of literacy, the banking concept manifests itself as an instrumental approach (Macedo, 2006). This approach emphasizes processes of decoding and comprehension (e.g., read this and explain what it means) while excluding critical instruction on questioning content or examining power relationships. The instrumental approach is the predominant approach to literacy in United States schools and has not assuaged the low-level literacy problems or the high dropout rates that plague non-dominant groups.

Creating Consciousness Through Critical Practices

The practices of critical literacy (Comber, 2016) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 2008) are a start at ways to counteract inequalities. Both critical literacy and critical pedagogy examine issues of power and language and stress the potential for democracy. A key principle is, despite inequalities in education, there are opportunities for “oppressed social groups to become literate and politically active about issues that matter in their daily lives...and education can position students as active agents in their own learning and the social and political life of their schools and communities” (Comber, 2016, p. 10).

Critical literacy is a form of critical pedagogy that focuses on reading texts for social justice and democratic ideals (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Critical literacy is not a program but an intellectual mind-set or stance that readers, viewers, or listeners can assume. Traditionally, “text” indicates written material, but critical literacy expands the definition of “text” to include all things that can be interpreted – e.g., editorial cartoons, graffiti, tattoos, signs, posters, ads, and podcasts. Students are provided space and tools to deconstruct social, economic, and political injustices. Using language, students question their everyday world to scrutinize popular culture and the media, to recognize how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider alternative actions that promote social justice (Janks, 2010). Critical literacy centers on “identifying social practices that keep dominant ways of under-

standing the world and unequal power relationships in place. Critical literacies are rooted in principles of democracy and justice, of questioning and analysis, of resistance and action” (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015, p. 3).

A central tenet of critical literacy is that no text is neutral; all texts are constructions influenced by the author’s attitudes and interpretations and reflect an author’s purpose. Each reader, viewer, or listener interprets texts differently based on the intersections between age, gender, class, and culture. Every medium has its own “language” that positions readers, viewers, or listeners (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Therefore, as students read, view, or listen, they go beyond decoding and comprehending text to discern what the text is trying to convince them of and why. They investigate and question whose interests are being served, whose voices are included and whose voices are absent, who wields power and upon whom is power wielded.

As such, critical literacy is not a prescribed curriculum. Teachers provide space and time for conversations around text wherein students can inquire into the various issues that arise based on their reading and interpretation. Students interrogate multiple viewpoints describing social and political issues. This requires juxtaposing multiple and contradictory text accounts of events (Luke & Freebody, 1997) to highlight differences rather than conceal it (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015). Students are encouraged to develop the ability to observe how privilege, power, and injustice impact daily life. For instance, students might investigate why some children are marginalized on the playground or in the cafeteria. That question can be extended to include why some groups of people are marginalized in society. This would lead to students considering the social consequences of marginalization. These inquiries can help students deepen their understanding of the complexities surrounding relationships of power and initiate ideas about how things could be different. Teachers and students use tools of language such as composing letters, reports, commercials, plays, counter narratives, and poems to challenge the status quo and promote social justice and transformation (Freire, 2008).

Implementing Critical Literacy Practices

After five years of being a reading specialist, I decided to return to teaching first grade. I was placed in a

different school but was given the same Columbus curriculum. However, with my budding knowledge about critical pedagogy and critical literacy, along with a personal faith commitment to help all students access complex ways of viewing the world, I took a more critical stance. Before introducing my students to Columbus, we read about the Taínos people; who they were and how they lived. We learned the Taínos lived on the islands of Hispaniola where the weather was tropical. The Taínos were clever and resourceful; they fished, hunted, cultivated crops and ate plentiful fruits provided by nature. On momentous occasions such as births, marriages, deaths, harvests, and coming-of-age, they held ceremonies and celebrations. We studied together about how the Taínos recognized the connection between all living things, holding a special reverence for Mother Earth and for their elders.

After learning about the Taínos, we studied Columbus. When we read about Columbus landing in the Bahamas, placing the flag in the ground, giving thanks, and claiming the land for Spain, my students reacted strongly. They could not fathom how Columbus declared the land for Spain when the Taínos were living there. This led us to read our social studies textbook to see if that would provide more information. In the entire chapter, there was only one sentence about the Taínos giving Columbus bells and parrots. My students were eager to know what happened to the Taínos. I read them Jane Yolen's (1992) picture book titled "Encounter." This story describes Columbus's landing from a Taíno boy's point of view. The boy warns his people not to welcome the strangers as they only seem to want their golden ornaments. The book alludes to abduction through the illustrations; some Taínos are on ships and some are in the water. The story ends with the boy as an old man, looking back and remembering the destruction of his people by Columbus and his men. Rather than answering their question, this story confused my students. Since they were first graders, I chose not to share details about hands being cut off, but I did explain that Columbus took some Taínos to Spain as slaves to repay the king and queen.

My students were upset and wanted to know why our textbook hardly mentioned the Taínos or that Columbus took them to Spain as slaves. The students noticed that all texts we read, except Encounter, were told from Columbus's point of view. We discussed the consequences of excluding the Taínos from his-

tory, and my students were adamant that their experiences should be included in the unit. So, as a class, we wrote a language experience story about Columbus and the Taínos. The students included many details about the Taínos and their way of life. They also wrote what they had learned about Columbus. Their version ended with a statement that Columbus did not actually discover America because the Taínos lived there first. That year, as we did every year, we had school off for Columbus Day. Upon returning from the three-day weekend, one student wanted to know why we had off for Columbus Day. He thought this was a bad idea even though he liked school holidays; the class agreed with him. I knew he was asking a significant question, one that was borne from a problem-solving inquiry; however, as I was still new to critical literacy and very much tied to the district-mandated curriculum, on that Tuesday, we began the next unit on the Pilgrims.

Concluding Thoughts

Looking back, I know I missed a perfect opportunity to continue the critical investigation of "problematizing" Columbus Day. We could have researched the history behind the holiday and taken action, such as writing letters or pamphlets to inform the school board or community that a holiday in Columbus' honor was unjust. But I experienced fear even in enacting small elements of critical literacy. I worried about not adhering strictly to the curriculum. I was afraid of what parents might say. Would they think I was persecuting Columbus or being too radical? And so, I hesitated. But I am continuing to learn and have courage to press into curricular directions that yield more questions than answers. I do know my students were actively engaged in the learning process; they interrogated multiple viewpoints, asked high level critical questions, examined the social ramifications, and composed a counter narrative of the discovery of America. My class's version included the voices of the Taínos and made for a richer, more inclusive account.

I regret allowing my own fear to stop the inquiry, but I now use this experience to educate my students who are studying to become teachers, themselves. My goal is to not only raise my students' critical literacy awareness, but to provide them with the time and space necessary to practice using the tools of critical literacy and inquiry. This practice enables students to gain both the ability and the courage to examine and question the assumptions, values, and nature of knowledge.

Further, my students identify and name problems, to reconstruct and rectify inequalities, to foster transformational social equity learning for all students.

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