

WHAT WORKS?

Research into Practice

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How can teachers better promote critical literacy across the curriculum and use it to help cultivate safer schools?

Promoting Critical Literacy across the Curriculum and Fostering Safer Learning Environments

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Research Tells Us

Critical literacy ...

- goes beyond simply decoding and understanding texts
- can be thought of as a way of thinking that challenges the inherent meaning of information and, by extension, life situations
- leads to understanding of power relationships that may help students to perceive and take action against injustice

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In their everyday practice, teachers commonly encourage children to think deeply and critically examine what they read and view. Over the last decade, this practice has been augmented by increased emphasis on the teaching of critical thinking and critical literacy skills in Ontario schools.^{1,2} By teaching students to understand and embrace diverse viewpoints and to consider underlying messages, critical literacy may help foster another important provincial priority, that of creating safe and caring learning environments.³

Critical Literacy as a Way of Thinking

Critical literacy is an effective vehicle for teaching students how to analyze social issues and unequal power relationships.^{4,5} Critical literacy skills can help students identify, reflect on and analyze underlying power relationships which are seldom apparent and are rarely explored in texts or in the media. As McLaughlin and DeVogd state, "The teaching of literacy involves the selection and framing of values, ideologies, and contending versions of 'truth'."⁶ They further define critical literacy as a way of thinking that challenges the inherent meaning of information and, by extension, life situations. Critical literacy is rooted in a rich history of approaching language and communication from a questioning and analytic standpoint.

Critical literacy goes beyond simply decoding and understanding texts; it emphasizes in-depth study in which messages and viewpoints are questioned and the power relationships – both in the text and between the author and readers – are considered. Deepening students' understanding of social justice through critical literacy equips them with knowledge that may help them to perceive and take action against injustice.

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Critical Literacy Skills in the Learning Environment

The acquisition of critical thinking skills may, in turn, help students shape how they interact with one another in the learning environment. By teaching students to reflect on human rights and social justice issues, critical literacy may help students develop empathy.⁸ As Henkin notes, critical literacy is “central to creating democratic, fair, and hate-free schools that confront all forms of bullying and harassment” (p. ix).⁴ Below are some suggested critical literacy activities:

Not just about literacy ...

“By teaching students to reflect on human rights and social justice issues, critical literacy may help students develop empathy.”

- **Use student questions as a starting point for meaningful, whole-class discussions on issues of social justice.** Allowing students to choose topics that are important to them increases the likelihood of authentic discussion with minimal teacher prompting. Employ a variety of mediums to expand student discussions on social justice issues: inquiry, exploratory talk, literature, reading, media, interviews, writing and reflection (p.9).⁴
- **Provide students with opportunities to participate in peer-led bullying prevention and intervention campaigns.** Some of the most successful bullying prevention campaigns are those initiated by students. Campaigns such as the pink t-shirt initiative, which was undertaken in response to a homophobic bullying incident, encourage students to support and empathize with each other. In doing so, these types of campaigns also foster safe, caring and inclusive learning environments.⁹
- **Create opportunities for safe and frank communication.** Nicolini suggests having students discuss the underlying issues of a text through a series of anonymous letters.⁸ This exercise affords students an opportunity to think critically, express their thoughts without fear of reprisal and consider other opinions on merit alone. As one student in Nicolini’s study put it, “We learned to value other students for their thoughts and opinions not from their outward appearance” (p. 78).⁸

Critical Literacy across the Curriculum

To become critically aware readers, students must move beyond simple comprehension of text to a deeper understanding of the underlying meanings, a critical reflection on the text’s purpose and an awareness of the techniques used to influence the reader. To help identify different perspectives and unequal power relations in texts, students may find it useful to consider some general questions:

- Is the author trying to send a deeper message? Who might agree/disagree with this message?
- Are other viewpoints missing?
- What technique(s) has the author used in this story to influence the reader? How might the text differ if it had been written by someone else?
- Who is marginalized in this text? Who is empowered?

Language Arts

An obvious subject area for the introduction of critical literacy activities in the classroom is the language arts curriculum.¹⁰ Considering books and literary texts, such as those suggested below, through a critical lens is an optimal way to enhance students’ critical literacy skills.

- *The Hating Book* by Charlotte Zolotow, and *Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson
Both books depict a similar conflict, yet one is written from a female viewpoint and the other from a male viewpoint. Teachers could ask:
 - How did the main characters resolve their conflict with their friend?

- What are similarities and differences between the ways they handled the conflict?
- How else might they have handled it?
- The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch

This book, which is appropriate for younger readers, reverses the gender roles in traditional fairy tales: The princess is the one who must slay the dragon and rescue the prince. Teachers could ask:

 - From whose perspective is the story being told?
 - How are the prince, princess and dragon portrayed in this story?
 - How would the story be different if told from the prince’s perspective? From the dragon’s perspective?

Does this fairy tale resemble a small or large number of fairy tales? Why do you think so?

Social Studies

The goals of the social studies curriculum are aligned with those of critical literacy, as both aim to teach students to reflect critically on a variety of issues and, thus, prepare them to participate in a culturally diverse and democratic society. The social studies curriculum provides numerous opportunities for students to learn about different geographical areas and their associated cultures, both in Canada and around the globe. This presents an ideal context for inclusive education and discussions of diversity.

- Have students participate in a “culture game.” Assign students fictional and contrasting cultural criteria (e.g., in Culture A, you are forbidden to look others in the eye when you greet them; in Culture B, you must shake hands while looking others in the eye in greeting). Ask students to interact with each other using their assigned cultural criteria. Lead a discussion about the students’ experiences as they interacted with one another. Ask students how what they learned could be applied to real-life situations where individuals of different cultures interact.
- Introduce French Canadian, First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultural perspectives with classroom activities that represent and appreciate the characteristics and contributions of these cultures.
 - Form a teaching circle and use a talking stick to encourage all student voices.
 - Read aloud David Bouchard’s *Long Powwow Nights*, which presents the powwow and other Métis and First Nation customs. Conduct a whole-class discussion about similarities and differences between the customs seen in the book and other customs. Ask students: Can you think of a ritual you practice that is similar to the powwow?
 - Repeat this activity using *Very Last First Time: An Inuit Tale*, by Jan Andrews, which depicts elements of Inuit culture in Ungava Bay, Canada. Following a read-aloud of the text, ask: What questions would you ask Eva if you met her? Whose perspectives are present/missing from the text?
- Have students take action as a result of the critical literacy activities carried out in the classroom. Engaging in volunteerism can make classroom activities more relevant and meaningful. Henkin⁴ combined volunteering at a nursing home with a classroom study of age-related social issues from various perspectives (e.g., striving to understand how the elderly may feel after leaving their homes).

Dimensions of Critical Literacy

Lewis, Flint and Van (p. 382)⁷ identify the four following dimensions of critical literacy:

- disrupting the commonplace
- considering multiple viewpoints
- examining sociopolitical issues
- taking action to promote social justice

Science and Technology

The science and technology curriculum¹¹ is ripe with opportunities for students to develop higher level thinking and inquiry skills. The study of environmental issues in particular affords many opportunities to promote critical literacy skills.

- Have students identify different perspectives concerning a particular environmental issue, as portrayed in the source material.
- Ask them to then identify perspectives that are not discussed and hypothesize reasons for the omission.
- Invite students to brainstorm possible solutions for the issues and to consider these solutions from multiple perspectives.
 - For example, after reading texts about how air is contaminated by smog from factories, ask students to brainstorm possible solutions that would benefit the workers, the factories, and the community members affected by pollution. They could also explore how conserving energy in the school or working with local conservation initiatives, such as Green Up or Ontario Conservation Authorities, might improve air quality.

Mathematics

The mathematics curriculum also strives to equip students with critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills, and to teach students to apply mathematical understanding and concepts to other subjects and to their everyday lives.

- Merge critical literacy and higher-order thinking skills in the form of creative problem-solving by giving students weekly mathematical story problems in which they are asked to find solutions from multiple perspectives.

- Encourage students to think critically about advertising by having them each watch a children's TV show and record which cereals are advertised.
 - Have the class compile this data and create graphs indicating frequency with which brands are advertised.
 - Supply students with a ranking of the healthiness of individual cereals (using Consumer Reports or a nutrition website) and ask students to design a new chart that indicates both ad frequency and nutrition ranking (e.g., on a bar graph that records ad frequency use different colour bars to indicate healthiness).
 - Supply nutritional data and have students calculate the grams of sugar as a percentage of total serving size for each cereal. Use this as an opportunity to discuss how advertisers market to children and whether key health information is downplayed.
 - Have students “take action” by incorporating what they learn into their own ads (print and skits) and sharing them with the school, or by voicing their concerns in letters to parliament and to manufacturers (pp. 104–122).¹²

Final Considerations

Schools, parents and community partners share in the responsibility of creating safe, caring and inclusive learning environments. This issue is not one that can be addressed in isolation, as the overall learning environment is not shaped just by individual actions. Critical literacy strategies, learned across the curriculum and supported by the school community, not only support higher order thinking skills but also help lay the foundation for integrating positive and inclusive behaviours – both in school and beyond.

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