

# A Critical Literacy Perspective for Teaching and Learning Social Studies

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When teachers bring a critical literacy perspective to the social studies classroom, they can teach students about the past to work for common good in the future.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

(From Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" in Braxton, 1993)

Amanda (all names are pseudonyms) felt the faces staring at her while she read the first verse of Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" (Braxton, 1993, p. 71). She knew what the members of her group were thinking—that she often masks her own racial identity for fear of being perceived as different. Amanda's skin tone is light brown. She is a mixed-race student in an elementary school classroom, and when she finished reading the verse aloud, she turned and said, "Color seems to be the problem for some people. Every day, I am aware of my color."

"Is color a problem for you?" Wade asked.

"It seems that I am a color first and then I am Amanda. I'm not always accepted," she said.

At first, the look on her face seemed a combination of disparagement and resignation, but then this bright young student made a crucial connection to Dunbar's poem when she exclaimed, "This poem is about racism! The words remind me that people of color are victims of racism; like others are against me because of my color."

Amanda's words unwittingly expose the fundamental rules of privilege and oppression that many students face in American schools. From her level of understanding, she is aware of the dynamics of race and ethnicity that affect her life in school and influence her life experiences in the society at large. In reality, Amanda is sometimes belittled by her classmates for her "different" (Giroux, 1993) status on the social scale. She typifies how acceptance, or a lack thereof, is determined by racial and cultural privilege sanctioned by the dominant group. These perceived differences are socially constructed and, by opening a space for Amanda to share her everyday encounters with others through social interaction, the students in this classroom were able to co-construct an understanding of the concepts of racism and discrimination as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This classroom example illustrates two significant implications for today's public school teachers. First, many of our students are cognizant about the issue of racism. Second, the fact that a sixth-grade student can articulate her own feelings of racism provides justification that issues of race, gender, culture, and power need to be brought to the forefront of our classroom societies to accommodate the range of student diversity in today's schools.

Amanda's poignant admission that she was a target of racism serves as a profound reminder of the largely invisible but powerful ways in which some of our students have been marginalized along race and class lines. Yet the recognition and affirmation of diversity is one fundamental way we as educators can promote democracy and understanding in the minds and actions of the students we teach. In this article we address these social issues by helping students take a critical stance as they read and respond

to social studies material. We begin with a more thorough rationale for the need to examine social studies from a global perspective, and then we argue for the need to empower our students by teaching them to read and process social studies content with a critical eye. Last, we provide an instructional model of critical literacy practices for social studies centered on Ciardiello's (2004) five themes for developing a democratic classroom.

## The Need to Address Social Issues

In response to the pressure that schools face to produce students who are literate members of society and to the current mantra of accountability and high-stakes testing, many questions are raised about how best to teach a social studies curriculum. Faced with national interests on standardization and constraints imposed by state and local policies, public school teachers are crunched for time more than ever to thoroughly plan, implement, and assess social studies units. However, today's students deserve more, because it is through the content of social studies that students learn to make sense of their lives.

Wineburg and Martin (2004) made the point that the best place to teach students how to question truths, sources, and evidence is in the social studies classroom. In addition, Ogle, Klemp, and McBride (2007) advocated that social studies should be taught in the present, not just the past, and related to current issues and events to engage and motivate today's students. Subsequently, students examine the cultural differences around the world and the increasing advancements in communication and technology that impact their lives. In this context, it is imperative that teachers provide specific guidance that will help students connect to the real world as well as find their places within that world.

The notion that schools should promote this democratic way of life is not a new one. Dewey (1916) maintained that schools should provide multiple opportunities for students to learn what a democratic way of life means and how it might be led. We believe, as Wineburg and Martin (2004) did, that the social studies classroom is the best place to teach students to be critical consumers of the many sources of information they encounter in their lives. For that reason we recommend teaching students to examine social

studies content more globally from a critical literacy perspective. In the next sections, we briefly describe our position on teaching and learning social studies with a critical stance.

## A Critical Literacy Perspective for Teaching and Learning Social Studies

Elementary-age students can become critically caring citizens by examining current and historical social justice issues through critical literacy. In such a curriculum, students are able to construct meaning within a social studies context and, within that context, develop knowledge and ways of knowing that will help them become discerning readers of text. Furthermore, the curriculum allows students to develop necessary dispositions to think as social scientists, develop abilities to take a critical posture toward content, and develop their capacities to transfer social studies concepts to their own lives. Subsequently, thinking, questioning, and discussing are valued, public sharing is encouraged, and learning is a collaborative process (Clarke, 2007; Spector & Jones, 2007; Wood, Soares, & Watson, 2006).

The term *critical literacy* describes a pedagogical approach to reading that focuses on the political, sociocultural, historical, and economic forces that shape young students' lives. It is an approach that teaches readers to become critically conscious of their own values and responsibilities in society (Ciardiello, 2004). Accordingly, the goal of critical literacy is to raise students' responsiveness toward societal problems in their world and to prompt students to ask why and for what reason are things the way they are, to question who profits the most, and then to act on making the world a better place (Beck, 2005; Comber & Nixon, 1999). Furthermore, critical literacy allows students to bring their own lived experiences into discussions, offering them opportunities for participation, engagement in higher levels of reading and discussion, and to understand the power of language.

In addition to promoting the value of social studies in the classroom and in society, teachers of critical literacy stress that texts have more than one interpretation and that varied perspectives should be considered. Luke and Freebody (1997) made the point that too often the language used in texts serves the

author's own interests and perspectives and frequently omits others' points of view. Subsequently, when students read from a critical stance, they read in opposition to texts and they are encouraged to question the construction of the text and how they are influenced during their reading (Bean & Moni, 2003). Questioning the author's intent helps students understand the sociocultural influences in their lives (Pearson, 2000), realize their roles in society and those of others around them, and raise questions that delineate who is not represented and who is not heard (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Critical literacy challenges the status quo and clarifies the connection between knowledge and power (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Freire & Macedo, 1987), which are social issues that we can address with our elementary learners.



of this theme is to teach students to ask questions that will raise critical awareness and prompt students to assess texts from multiple perspectives (Bean & Moni, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004), such as, What does the author want us to know? What different interpretations are possible? What kind of person and with what interests and values wrote this text? What view of the world is this text presenting? How is power used and what effect does power have on others? Whose voice is missing and what alternate ways can texts be presented to give voice to the silenced?

However, we must do more than ask questions. In addition, social studies teachers need to teach their students to search for those voices missing or silenced in texts and bring them to the forefront of the classroom to agree with or reject the author's point of view (Luke & Freebody, 1997). For example, while studying westward expansion, we ask our students to research the relationship between the Native Americans and the white settlers and the effects that the Native Americans endured, such as disease and starvation, relocation, economic destruction, ethnic and cultural prejudice, and genocide. We guide our students to discover and explore the silent voices through questions such as: Should the United States have used its power to remove the Native Americans from their land? How did the government of the United States ignore the Supreme Court's decision on the Native American removal policy? How did the Native Americans feel about and react to their relocation?

Other social justice issues we address from a critical literacy perspective are topics such as war, women's rights, the Civil Rights movement, child labor, migrant workers' issues, and poverty. For example, the book *Only What We Can Carry* (Inada, 2000) centers on the theme of civil rights for interned Japanese Americans during World War II. This text offers a wealth of information and multiple viewpoints that allow students to explore the theme of civil rights through poetry, prose, autobiography, news accounts, government documents, and letters. The project can be done in conjunction with another topic such as the Holocaust, which extends the

## An Instructional Model of Critical Literacy Practices for Social Studies

As teachers who understand the important role that critical literacy plays in developing a democratic classroom, we present Ciardiello's (2004) five themes for enlightening readers on issues of social justice: examining multiple perspectives, finding an authentic voice, recognizing social barriers, finding one's identity, and finally, the call to service. We further show practical ways to integrate these themes in the social studies classroom using current and past events while teaching our students to read from a critical stance.

### Theme One: Examining Multiple Perspectives

The social studies classroom is the perfect venue for students to examine multiple perspectives because the very discipline fosters an environment of what Greene (1978) called "wide-awakeness," the recognition that individuals view the world, people, and events from varied and multiple perspectives. One vital strategy we use to accomplish the goals

opportunity to examine the silenced voices of fear, prejudice, class, and racism. The optimal goal is to provide opportunities for students to examine the identity of literary characters, explore the nature of the events in which they take part, and analyze the outcomes of their living experiences to connect issues of the past to relevant issues in their world today by prompting students to take a critical stance while questioning and responding to social issues.

Because critical literacy is about interrogating textual ideologies and engaging in multiple perspectives (Edelsky, 1999), the following literature circle discussion from Lina's (first author's) classroom serves to illustrate how strategic practices in critical literacy offer a forum for readers to consider multiple viewpoints on issues of social justice. The students were asked to respond to the question: What does the author want you to know from reading *The Devil's Arithmetic* (Yolen, 1988)?

Lief: It [the book] shows the extent of harmful stereotyping because the Jews were stereotyped as bad. They were killed 'cause they were different.

Tina: I agree. Now, that I think about it, this is an example of how power can be abusive because the Jews were killed in senseless ways. In reality, power can be used against others just because their skin color is different or for different religions.

Jeremiah: Well, this story could be told today. Even today people are mass-murdered for being different when groups in power kill those who they feel are ethnically inferior, like the people in Darfur.

Zoe: Oh yeah! Darfur is another example of thousands being murdered while the world sits back and watches. You know, this book shows the world is unsafe for those who are different. The racism is horrible. Yolen [the author] wants us to know how the Jews suffered and to never forget how they died but it seems it's happening again.

Tina: You know this book is like *Number the Stars* [Lowry, 1989]. The Jews are threatened in both books and the Nazis have taken over cities and towns in both books, but Yolen fails to tell us that not all

Germans were Nazis and many Germans risked their lives to help Jews.

Lief: Good point. The book does show us Yolen's views but she [Yolen] does ignore the people who tried to help the Jews.

According to Harste (2003), good curriculum involves planning for student conversation to allow engagement in real world activities. Subsequently, teachers who practice critical literacy continually strive to have their students question and analyze what is going on in their world to seek multiple meanings. They provide opportunities for their students to understand that no one text tells the whole story, such as in the previous student conversation that illustrates how interactive dialogue can allow students to explore multiple viewpoints and voice different perspectives while exploring past and current events.

## Theme Two: Find Authentic Voice

Closely associated with examining texts for multiple perspectives is the critical literacy practice of finding one's authentic voice. The construct of voice is highly charged and means different things to different people; however, Bakhtin (1981, 1986) described voice as dialogic, a concept that means language and the ideas represented by language are dynamic. To Bakhtin, anything said by one individual has been said before and is said in anticipation of how the words will be received. As a result, social relations are subscribed to in all language and, as Bourdieu (1991) offered, there is a difference between being able to produce words that are "likely to be listened to, likely to be recognized as acceptable" (p. 55) and the reality that some words are not heard. Recognizing that not all voices are heard or accepted and that some voices are more privileged than others, it is essential that students learn to speak out against the unequal power relations that exist in all forms of text.

Critical literacy allows young social scientists to critically examine their social studies text to understand how the language of power benefits dominant voices (Behrman, 2006). However, for students who have been marginalized along race and class lines, this is not an easy task, for their voices may have been silenced as well. Freire (1970) posited that when students learn to criticize the language of texts that are influenced by the social, cultural, political,



and historical forces that function as interrelated processes through dominant discourse they can strip away the oppressive forces that surround their own lives. One way we introduce the concept of voice is to ask questions such as: How much do you appreciate your right to vote on topics and events that are important to you? How do you feel about having a part in the decision-making process? Using these kinds of questions engages our students in discussions, allows them the opportunity to personalize the concept of authentic voice, and helps them explore the meaning behind the concept (Ciardiello, 2004).

We share the wonderful story *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: A Photo-Illustrated Biography* (Davis, 1998) with our students to describe how the famous suffragette began at an early age to use her voice to gain equal treatment in school and to study the same academic subjects as boys. The goal from this lesson is to teach our students how ordinary citizens like them fought hard and even died for the right to vote, a right that was denied women and African Americans until the early to mid-20th century. In conjunction, our elementary school students learn that the 26th Amendment is a result of the many young adult voices who spoke out during the Vietnam era, arguing that if they were old enough to go fight in a war in a faraway place, then their right to vote was important.

In addition, our students read news accounts from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s to develop an understanding of how the leaders of the movement used their voices to speak out against racism and take action to change the social injustices in their lives. Most students are familiar with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1963) "I Have a Dream" speech by title only; many have never studied the contents of the actual speech. We direct our students to go online and read the words of this historic speech to identify how King's unique voice mobilized his supporters to fight segregation and ultimately brought about the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The goal is for young learners to become more knowledgeable on important issues in their world and then to specifically connect their voice to critical issues. As Simon (1987) articulated, "An education that creates silence is not an education" (p. 370); therefore, it is crucial that students be given opportunities to discuss, debate, and rewrite cultural narratives using their unique voices while becoming critically literate. When elementary-age children are given opportunities to break the silence of the

disenfranchised through literature study, dialogue, debates, drama, music, and film, they can discover their own voices and begin to act toward making things more equitable (Ciardiello, 2004; Comber & Simpson, 2001).

### **Theme Three: Recognize Social Barriers and Cross Borders of Separation**

As today's classrooms become more diverse, several barriers can arise that interfere with effective classroom teaching. Issues created by race, poverty, gender equity, and religious or ethnic injustices perpetuate the insider and outsider status (Kruse, 2001) that public schools encounter. These forms of segregation create barriers that are antithetical to the development of democracy in the classroom and democratic citizenship at large. Identifying and acknowledging social barriers and borders of separation is a third important theme in critical literacy (Ciardiello, 2004). This theme can be introduced using critical literacy strategies that prompt students to knock down barriers so they can relate what is going on in the classroom with their own lives.

An important first step we take is to teach our students how harmful assumptions can lead to stereotypes and unfair judgments about individuals and groups and thus to the establishment of social barriers. Accordingly, we ask our students to share an experience in which they have been the recipients of biased judgments or when others acted unfairly toward them because of their skin color, age, gender, the clothes they were wearing, how they spoke, or where they lived. Such questions to introduce this theme might include: What words or actions have ever been directed at you because of negative assumptions or stereotypes? How did the experience make you feel? How do you think you should have been treated in that situation?

To further emphasize how negative assumptions can create borders of separation, we discuss the reality of living in a particular society as a member of a nondominant culture and not having the same opportunities afforded to members of the dominant culture. For example, while studying War World II, our students read *The Children of Topaz: The Story of a Japanese-American Internment Camp Based on a Classroom Diary* (Tunnell & Chilcoat, 1996) to examine how certain immigrant groups were treated. The

story involves a group of third graders who attend class behind the barbed wire fences of a Japanese internment camp in the United States in 1943. During their compulsory isolation from society, the third graders' reactions are captured by their classroom teacher. Their life experiences during World War II serve to illustrate the ideas of "sameness" and "otherness" that Giroux (1989) posited when a dominant group makes unfair sociocultural assumptions about an entire group of individuals. It is essential that our young social scientists understand that while historians often refer positively to the United States as a melting pot of different cultures, races, and religions, the experiences of Japanese American citizens during World War II serve to remind us how negative stereotypes are used to justify discrimination and oppression.

In conjunction, social studies teachers can have their students read *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* (Krull, 2003). This biography of the Mexican American migrant labor leader provides students with a unique glimpse of the enculturation difficulties that many immigrants experience. One telling example is the fact that Chavez attended 27 different schools before he reached the eighth grade because his family worked the fields and moved often to find work. As a result, he never could successfully acquire the English language and he was isolated and tormented in school by having to wear a sign around his neck that read, "I am a clown. I speak Spanish." The segregation that Chavez experienced in school informs young social scientists about how discrimination can create barriers and borders of separation.

This practice of critical literacy teaches students that the topic of exclusion is very real and that when they can identify stereotypes and how such stereotypes are developed, they are better able to open their minds and build an understanding of and respect for diversity in the classroom. The goal is to teach students to look beyond the cultural differences to perceive a wider view of the world.

### **Theme Four: Find One's Identity**

The fourth theme of Ciardiello's (2004) instructional model for critical literacy deals with the concept of identity. As teachers, we might wonder about the importance of this theme in social studies, but lest we forget, not all students are the same. At the most basic level, social studies relates historic accounts

about people who are considered to be outside the mainstream of society and have been marginalized in some way (Salas, 2001). Today, many of our students are on the margins of society because of racial, cultural, and language differences, and these differences work to shape our students' identities.

Gee (2001) informed us that the concept of identity is situated within a context, and therefore, it is important in the context of a democratic classroom that students learn how prejudice and discrimination create feelings of low self-worth and negative self-images. From this stance, we believe that students should be given opportunities to find themselves reflected in the texts they read. When young learners relate to characters and situations found in books that are reflective of their own diversity, they are better able to make connections to their everyday lives (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Conversely, when students do not find themselves reflected in the texts they read, they are more likely to interpret this omission as a message that school is not for people like them (Colby & Lyon, 2004).

The social studies classroom is the perfect forum for students to find their true identity, because it fosters a climate where students can open their minds, think creatively, and be open to the possibility of social healing. To introduce the concept of identity, we read the delightful story of *Chrysanthemum* (Henkes, 1991) about a small mouse who had always thought her name was perfect until she began school. While at school, she learns that she is the only one with a very unusual name, for which she is constantly teased. After reading the story, we discuss how Chrysanthemum felt and find out if any of our students have experienced a similar trial when their name made them feel different from others. To further explore this theme, we ask our students the following questions: Are you named for anyone? Does your name have a special meaning? Has

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anyone ever teased you about your name? If so, how did you feel? Questions of this nature engage our students in discussions that encourage personal growth in the classroom and at the same time provide the time and space for our students to think about who they are as they develop an understanding of identity (Ciardiello, 2004).

Additionally, teachers can help students realize the importance of self-identity by examining how prejudice and discrimination cause some members of society to feel inferior and develop false mental images (Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996). For example, when studying the Jim Crow era, students can learn how the status of black Americans was economically, educationally, and socially inferior to that of white Americans and how racial segregation in public places, schools, and transportation was the result of prejudice and racism. To illustrate how black Americans felt during this period, teachers can have their students read *Sounder* (Armstrong, 1969) to note how the main character remains lonely and nameless throughout the novel. The key is to encourage and guide student concern for the topic through questions that elicit thinking from a critical stance. The following excerpt was taken from a whole-class discussion by sixth-grade students about their reading from *Sounder*:

- Teacher: I am wondering about the main character. Do we ever know his name?
- Steve: The Boy is the main character but he has no voice. He doesn't even have a name like I do. He's just called Boy. What do you guys think?
- Candice: He [Boy] has no name 'cause he is not heard. The sheriff is the authority and his voice dominates. He's [Boy] a nothing. It's discrimination.
- Rachel: I think this is an example of how blacks in the South were treated unfairly because the sheriff had all the power and his voice dominated. It makes me mad and I feel sorry for him [Boy]. I wouldn't want to shut up if someone shot my dog. First, I like my dog better than some of my friends and if something happened to her, the pain would be too much and I would make my voice heard. The sheriff would know my name.

This brief exchange indicates that while reading and responding to the text's social issues, the students gave meaning to Boy's silenced voice and equated this to discrimination. Furthermore, the dialogue revealed that as each student expressed concern for how the main character had been silenced, they did so having simultaneously analyzed their own feelings as they reacted to the teacher's prompt. In other words, each participant was aware of his or her own self and identity at that moment and this further allowed them to identify with Boy.

Incorporating the discovery of self-identity in the social studies classroom is necessary for young learners who are engaged in issues of race, gender, culture, and power differentials in their studies. These broad categories have the potential to promote prejudice, the very same prejudice Giroux (1989) wrote about for students who do not "fit" the mainstream norm. By helping our students understand and counter prejudice in their lives, we are also helping our students discover their self-worth and identity.

### **Theme Five: The Call to Service**

The final theme of Ciardiello's (2004) instructional model for critical literacy is the call to service that aims to strengthen democracy through civic education, service learning, and democracy-minded pedagogies. The underlying assumption is that elementary-age students can become "democratic agents of civic competence" (p. 146) by connecting historical and social injustices of the past to their present world using critical literacy practices. The civic view centers on the nurturing of citizenship and encourages an educational partnership between school and community. Second, a very real concern in our democracy today is the divisions between people by race, class, gender, and age. At the very least, service learning projects allow students of different backgrounds to join together for the good of the community. Accordingly, where the school itself reflects the diversity among its students, community service integrated into a curriculum can be an effective device for understanding one's own identity in relation to community and for engaging with other students from diverse perspectives.

Service learning programs can be taught through activities initiated in the classroom. We have found that students do not often need to be encouraged to help others, but rather, they just need to know what

steps they should take to get involved. One plan we have implemented effectively is to read aloud the article “The Town That Loves Refugees” (Wilkinson, 2005) to learn about the resettlement process for refugees. The goal is to engage students in a discussion about social and economic issues and to learn about the immigrant population in their own community through the service aspect of the project. Accordingly, we provide opportunities for our students to volunteer at a local immigration service organization, to interview and collect data from area immigrants about the needs of their community, and then to meet with local politicians to share their findings. With this same project, our students enlist their parents as civic agents to encourage family involvement by conducting a donations drive, a book drive, or by packing baskets of school supplies. By doing this, they see the reality of their knowledge and experience as a benefit to others and gain an understanding of global problems at the local level.

## A Final Word

As teachers of diverse classrooms, our instructional sites are the perfect venue to celebrate differences and to embrace common humanity. We can teach our students to work collectively as a group for a more democratic world by providing opportunities for them to expand their thinking and to grapple with issues of freedom, social responsibility, citizenship, and personal identity. The social studies classroom is the logical place to teach students about the past in order to work for the common good in the future. It is here, in our classrooms, that we can integrate a critical literacy perspective in our teaching of social studies with the goal of developing in our students the capacity for critical thinking within a global society.

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