

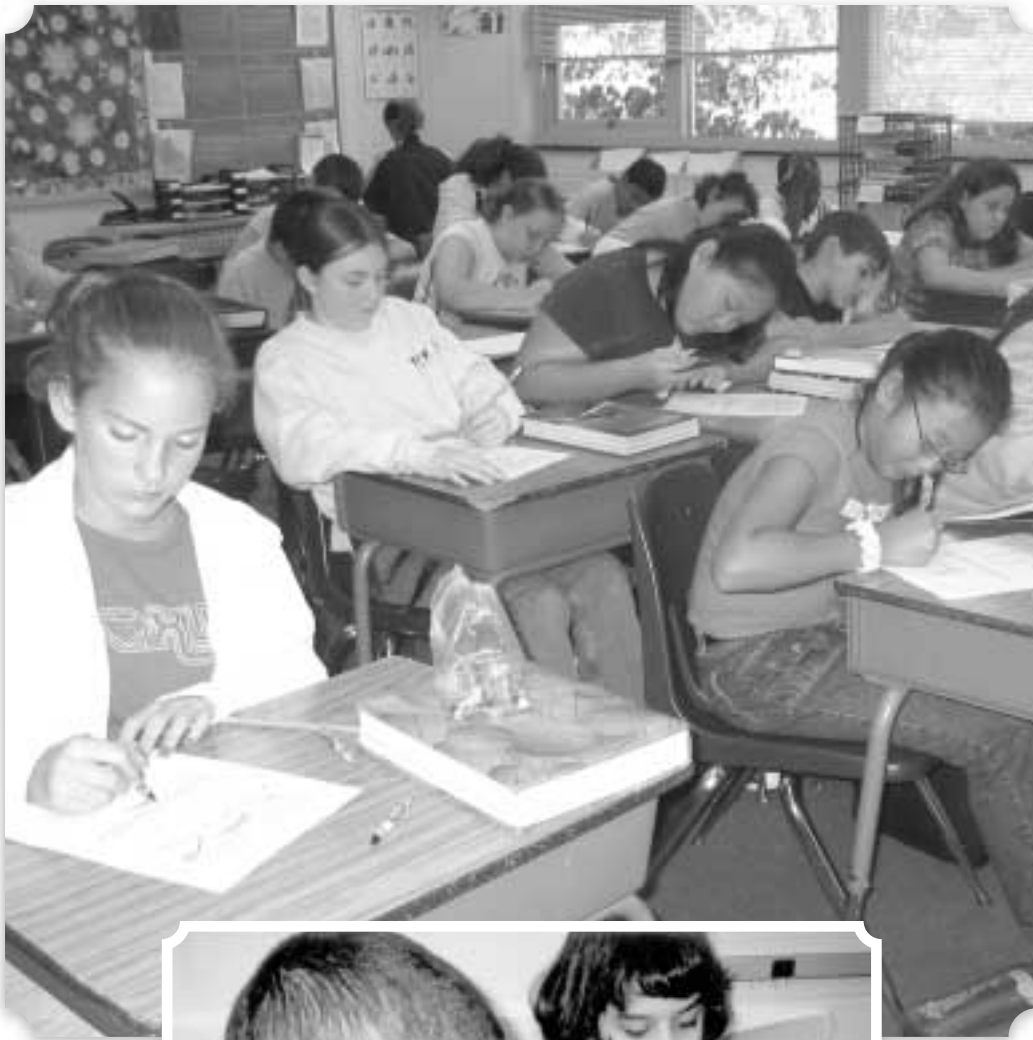
Demystifying Critical Literacy



Before we, as teachers, can begin to use critical literacy, we need to have a clear understanding of what it is and why it is important. Once we become critically aware, we need to know how to teach our students to read from a critical stance. These are the topics addressed in Part One.

In Chapter 1, we define critical literacy, discuss related principles, and examine how critical literacy relates to current beliefs about literacy. Then, we discuss how critical literacy supports state standards and functions within school curriculums.

In Chapter 2, we focus on creating contexts that promote critical literacy. Ideas that support critical literacy, instructional frameworks, critical literacy strategies, and texts are among the topics addressed.



Becoming Critically Aware

“Critical literacy has opened up a new level of understanding to my students and to me. In the past, we were very focused on comprehension, but now it is that and more. It’s as if comprehension used to be our ultimate goal, but now it’s the point at which we begin our critical discussions.”

AMY HOMEYER, fifth grade teacher

Amy is a member of a group of educators we’ve been working with who have been infusing critical literacy into their teaching for the past two years. As you’ll read in subsequent chapters, other members of the group have also commented on their students’ ability to comprehend at deeper levels—levels that go beyond the usual goal of understanding the text to understanding from a critical perspective.

Current thinking about reading (Luke & Freebody, 1999; Pearson, 2001) suggests that we should help our students to comprehend at these deeper levels—levels that require them to think beyond the information on the printed page and critically analyze the author’s message. Reading from a critical perspective involves thinking beyond the text to understand issues such as why the author wrote about a particular topic, wrote from a particular perspective, or chose to include some ideas about the topic and exclude others.

In this chapter, we examine critical literacy by responding to a number of frequently asked questions. We begin by explaining what critical literacy is, discussing related principles, and making connections to current beliefs about literacy. Next, we explain how critical literacy fits into school curriculums and supports state standards. Finally, we discuss how we, as teachers, can use our understanding of critical literacy to help our students become critically literate.

What Is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy views readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text's message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors. It focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action (Freire, 1970).

THE PRINCIPLES OF CRITICAL LITERACY

The Principles of Critical Literacy (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004) include a number of essential understandings and beliefs about the power relationship that exists between the reader and the author. The four principles follow:

Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action.

Whenever readers commit to understanding a text—whether narrative or expository—they submit to the right of the author to select the topic and determine the treatment of the ideas. For example, if we, as teachers, read a headline that says, “New Security Standards for Schools Cause Tax-Rate Increase,” we would recognize the power of the author of the article to name the problem and determine and express what he perceives to be the negative effects of increased security standards. In turn, we, as readers, may use our power to question that perspective and engage in *reflection* about whose voice might be missing, discounted, or silenced in the article. As a result, we might choose to represent the alternative view of the subordinated group—the schools—and change the title of the text to “Additional Security Measures Provide Greater Protection for Our Children.” The readers draw from their background knowledge to create this *transformation*, which might result in taking an action such as writing a letter to the editor of the local newspaper or speaking to a group about the importance of school security. In addition, the readers

may also gain a new appreciation of the effect of perspective in writing or even a new understanding of the possible positive costs of increased security. This is an example of how critical literacy focuses on issues of power and helps subjugated or oppressed groups, in this case the teachers, to help “politicize themselves and engage in action aimed at challenging existing structures of inequality and oppression” (Cummins & Sayers, 1995, p. 23). “The challenge is to adopt practices that will not only open up new possibilities but also will begin to deal with taking action” (O’Brien, 2001, p. 53). Good intentions or awareness of an unjust situation will not transform it. We must act on our knowledge.

This cycle of “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” is what Freire (1970, p. 36) calls praxis. By nature, this process is not passive but active, challenging and disrupting the ideal (Green, 2001) or commonplace (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) for the purpose of relieving inequity and injustice.

Critical literacy focuses on the problem and its complexity.

Educational situations that are fairly intricate are often viewed from an essentialist—very simplistic—perspective. In critical literacy, rather than accepting an essentialist view, we would engage in problematizing—seeking to understand the problem and its complexity. In other words, we would raise questions and seek alternative explanations as a way of more fully acknowledging and understanding the complexity of the situation. For example, it would be essentialist to merely suggest that unmotivated students should receive an extrinsic reward for reading or be punished for not reading. Problematizing—or examining the complexity of this situation—would reveal that the lack of motivation is likely due to a variety of factors that may include poor-quality texts, students’ past reading experiences, classroom climate, self-efficacy, purpose, or limited opportunities to self-select, read, and discuss books in social settings.

Critical literacy strategies are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used.

There is no list of methods in critical literacy that work the same way in all contexts all the time. No technique that promotes critical literacy can be exported to another setting without adapting it to that context. As Freire (1998, p. xi) has observed, “It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them.”

Comber (2001b, p. 271) has observed that when teachers and students are engaged in critical literacy, they “ask complicated questions about language and power, about people