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The Transformative Power of Literacy

RENE MENDEL LEBSOCK

“There is an in-separable link that exists between racism and economic inequality”¹

Fresno Pacific University (FPU) is located in Fresno, CA, the largest city in the Central Valley with a populace of half a million. It has a diverse population of immigrants and ethnic groups who live in urban and low-income areas. Antonia Darder states that “90% of segregated African American and Latino neighborhood schools are located in areas of concentrated, abject poverty”². These are the neighborhoods in which a significant number of Fresno Pacific teaching candidates will obtain employment.

The average teacher education student enrolled at FPU is white, middle class and generally unfamiliar with the challenges that come from living in poverty. Frequently graduate students see the poor as victims. Gloria Ladson-Billings observed her student teacher’s tendencies to see African Americans as victims.

. . . many of these soon to be teachers viewed African Americans as victims. . . Thus their ability to view African American students as capable, intellectual beings was severely compromised. Rarely do these student teachers recognize the prevalence and persistence of racism as contributing to the poor social, economic, political and educational circumstances of African Americans.³

There is an additional tendency for student teachers to “blame the victim.” That is, to hold those affected by poverty responsible for their plight instead of seeing them as victims of injustice. Shor wrote, “Blaming the victim is a refusal to see social problems as social. Instead individuals are blamed for their failure in a society which allegedly offers everyone opportunity. The person is indicted instead of the system.”⁴

By recognizing the poor as victims or perceiving their hardship as self-inflicted, new teachers will often lower their expectations of what their students

can accomplish. Through critical literacy experiences, prospective teachers begin to question their assumptions about students from urban and low-income areas and develop methods and strategies to empower all students to reach their full potential. “Critical literacy is a process of using literature as a means to inspire an appreciation for diversity and to promote equality. Critical literacy is an active, reflective manner of reading in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships.”⁵

Literacy possesses the promise of transformative changes in societies plagued with structural inequality. According to Freire, “We can think of the acquisition of literacy as the act of decoding, or by contrast, we can think of it as the development of the capacity in the reader to read both the word and the world.”⁶ The acquisition of literacy, to Freire, was more than “memorizing sentences, words, or. . . lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe – but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation. . .”⁷

To Freire, literacy acquisition initiates social regeneration. “The raising of critical consciousness in people who have been oppressed is the first step in helping them to obtain critical literacy.”⁸

Dialogue becomes the foundation on which learning opportunities are designed. Under this philosophy, learning experiences serve a dual purpose – a setting for academic and intellectual growth, as well as a venue for developing a social consciousness capable of creating more equitable opportunities for the poor and oppressed. “Ultimately, critical literacy can lead to an emancipated worldview and even transformational social action.”⁹

An admirable illustration of critical literacy, in the classroom, is presented in the article, “Liberatory Consequences of Literacy,” by Gloria Ladson-Billings. She writes about extraordinary teacher, Ann Lewis, who lives and teaches in an inner city school. Lewis wants her students to think critically about a world filled with violence, poverty, and social injustice. She chooses books that provide her predominately African American students with exposure to different cultures and traditions and challenges their ideas about social justice. She desires to confront her students “with the huge ideas of injustice and prejudice against those who seem ‘different.’” It is crucial for young people to think

critically about how oppression and the marginalization of those who seem different impact society at large. . .”¹⁰

However, critical literacy must not only provide awareness of social injustice, it must also have an action component in which the students find ways to promote fairness and equity in society. “We want students to come to see themselves as change makers. If we ask the children to critique the world but then fail to encourage them to act, our classrooms can degenerate into factories for cynicism.”¹¹

Lewis challenged me to integrate critical literacy experiences into my FPU teacher education course, Language and Literacy. Initially, my aspiration was to broaden teacher education students’ awareness of structural inequality in education. It was my expectation that, providing opportunities for my students to see the effects of inequality from a new perspective would result in their ability to empathize with students coming from urban and low income areas. Consequentially, I anticipated that my students would begin to develop an appreciation for diversity and embrace the value of differences among people. Additionally I aspired to demonstrate effective ways to incorporate meaningful classroom literacy experiences in order that my student teachers might someday employ these methods in their own teaching experiences.

We began the semester by watching segments from the movie *Freedom Writers*, a chronicle of Erin Gruwell and her work with marginalized high school students. After watching portions of the video, my student teachers participated in reflections focusing on hidden assumptions and culturally relevant teaching. After watching the first portion of the video, students were asked to identify assumptions demonstrated by both the educators and students. My students recognized moments in which virtually all of the characters generated presuppositions that influenced their actions and attitudes. For example, Gruwell assumed her students would accept her and was discouraged when this expectation did not materialize. The high school students anticipated that their teacher would not remain at their school, so they didn’t provide her with an opportunity to teach. The learning director assumed the students were incapable of learning, so they were given boring, watered-down curriculum. The distinguished honors teacher assumed the students would drop out and consequentially, that

is what typically occurred. Through these video segments, my student teachers recognized ways in which expectations can influence actions. Consequently, they recognized that high expectations are essential for students' success.

The second question I asked my students to reflect upon was, "How does Gruwell make learning meaningful and relevant to her students?" My student teachers realized that she didn't just teach a "structured curriculum," instead she involved her students in reading culturally relevant books that depicted relatable characters. Gruwell's students wrote from "the heart" and were able to express themselves in ways which fostered self-actualization (Freire). Through writing, her students began making connections between their own lives and the lives of others who had also suffered injustice. Gruwell's use of critical literacy in her classroom resulted in a mission to make the world a better place for everyone. The following quotes were written by my students, on a questionnaire given at the end of the semester (Student's responses have not been edited for grammar.):

- Watching this movie I realized that we often judge these kinds of students. They were not motivated, poor, below grade level. Really motivates me to make a difference and take an action for children who live in this kind of society.

- It surprised me how teachers thought of their own students and how they did not expect them to succeed.

- I loved this activity!! It really opens the eyes to the cultural differences between everyday members of society. It helped me look at student needs differently.

- Reminded me of injustices caused to other races and how important it is to be a voice for the students.

- I feel a great sense of pride in what I do from that movie. I felt like, by being the best teacher I can be, will inspire students. Even one child who doesn't give up and moves forward makes me feel like God wanted me to do this.

The second critical literacy experience involved examining multicultural text sets. Each set revolved around a broad theme designed to promote acceptance of different cultures and traditions. In small groups, the student teachers analyzed the themed books and explored inter-textual/personal and global connections between the texts. The students were also asked to reflect on their

impression of the books/themes and to share what impact the text sets had on them:

- After reading texts, It made me aware that although I was culturally sensitive myself, I wasn't necessarily teaching my students or giving them a chance to express their culture.

- (I learned) How to be culturally sensitive as a teacher mindful that students come from all sorts of walks of life as well as cultural backgrounds.

- (I learned about) The diversity of students and how to respect all students and integrate using their ethnicity and culture into the learning experience.

- The multicultural texts should be read in schools so all children from K-12 grade can have facts and reality rather than developing ignorance and misinformation.

- Helped me think of school from the perspective of an English learner.

- This provides insights into issues/inequality connecting this to many students here in the valley. It influenced me to want to take action by recognizing what students go through – to create a better life with more opportunity.

- I really learned about multicultural texts. I have realized that these kinds of texts can provide new insights into issues of inequalities and poverty.

The third literacy experience was a literature study on immigrants from Mexico. The student teachers selected one of three short novels and formed literature groups. Each week the students would come prepared to discuss the narratives during class. I asked my students to share how this activity affected their own attitudes about immigration. The following are some of their replies:

- The novel helped me to better understand what immigrants have gone through.

- This really provided me with new insights into what immigrants go through to come to America. It influences me to want to help create an at home environment for these students and to enhance their learning to the fullest.

- Doing this group has really provided me with a clearer insight of inequality and especially poverty. It not only showed me what was happening in the characters life, but what could very likely happen at my students home life.

- This pointed out to me the stereotypes we typically have of people who come over from Mexico and work in the fields. It has never crossed my mind

that someone of high status, like Esperanza, had to leave the nice life she had and come here w/no other option. Not all Mexican field workers choose to be “uneducated” and they are just trying to live like the rest of us

- I think this activity helped me to identify with specific challenges . . . that I hear about in the news but never really understood what the reason was for leaving family to work in the U.S.

The final critical encounter was an activity in which students formed a horizontal line and moved forward or backwards depending on the answer to questions about their background and culture. Most middle class white students found themselves moving forward while minority students were often left behind. Following this activity we had a powerful discussion on the implications of racial inequality. This experience exposed structural inequality and illustrated the advantages many of my students, unknowingly, encounter as they live their lives. My student teachers made some excellent reflections:

- I noticed the shock on the faces of the 2 young women who ended up way ahead of everyone else. I don’t think they had any idea they had so many privileges in their lives.

- This was probably my favorite activity and discussion of class. The lawn activity was very telling and the discussion was rich and helped bring out the real life experiences of classmates. These types of discussions should occur more in class.

- This made things more personal being able to see the experiences people in my class have had. It showed me the inequality there is between groups of people at the same academic level.

- My favorite part of the whole class! I have never experienced discrimination but seeing how it affected my friends was a real eye opener for me.

- This was one of the best activities ever. Although I didn’t necessarily enjoy it, I thought it brought a new awareness to the other students. It allowed them to see that all students are not on a level playing field. We are not all equal in education or in the job market. Equality is not always as it seems.

- Gave me a visual of what experiences people have had and how much it takes for those of us in the back to get to where we are today.

As my students interacted in the activities mentioned above, I believe many of them began to perceive the negative effects of structural inequality. In the first experience, students witnessed how assumptions created a distorted view of reality and discovered ways in which culturally relevant learning experience enhanced the student's willingness to participate in class. The two experiences with children's literature provided an awareness of the obstacles that immigrants encounter coming to the U.S. The final critical activity generated mindfulness that not everyone begins their journey on an even playing field or are afforded the same privileges.

I intend to continue creating opportunities to share critical literacy experiences with my impending language and literacy students. Consequently, I hope these class reflections will spark a passion for social justice that will not fade as these prospective teachers are immersed in the realities of teaching. I want to promote learning that will encourage student teachers to look beyond racial, social economic, and cultural differences and purposefully consider how diversity empowers us to live with appreciation and acceptance of others.

NOTES

- 1 Darder & Miron, "Critical Pedagogy in a Time of Uncertainty: A Call to Action Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies," Sage Publications, 2006.
- 2 Darder & Miron, "Critical Pedagogy in a Time of Uncertainty: A Call to Action Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies," Sage Publications, 2006.
- 3 Gloria Ladson-Billings, "But that's just good teaching: The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *Theory Into Practice*, 34, 159-165. 1995.
- 4 Ira Shor, "Critical Teaching & Everyday Life," The University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- 5 Heather Coffee, "Critical Literacy," LEARN NC, a program of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. www.learnnc.org.
- 6 Paulo Freire, "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed," New York: Seabury Press, (Original work published 1970).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Heather Coffee, "Critical Literacy," LEARN NC, a program of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. www.learnnc.org.
- 10 Gloria Ladson-Billings, "But that's just good teaching: The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" *Theory Into Practice*, 34, 159-165. 1995.
- 11 Comber, Barbara, "Making use of theories about literacy and justice: teachers re-searching practice," *Citation Educational Action Research*, March 2005, Vol. 13 Issue: Number 1 43-56, 141. (March 2005).