Sociocultural and Political Literacies in Teacher Education
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Abstract
This paper session will share two studies exploring how two teacher educators, a group of pre-service teachers, and one novice teacher worked to challenge inequities embedded within their literacy instruction, curricula, and teacher education courses. The researchers examined ways to transform practice and enact literacy instruction from a critical pedagogical stance. In the first setting, pre-service teachers engaged in book clubs to dialogue around diversity and equitable literacy instruction. In the second setting, a second grade teacher applied new understandings of critical literacy and diversity to her literacy instruction. NRC participants will be challenged to thinking about how teachers and researchers work towards recognizing dominant power structures, designing equitable practices, and making issues of equity explicit in our professional roles.

Significance of the Topic
With the 2009 NRC conference theme in mind, this session will focus on research that directly relates to equitable literacy instruction in K-12 and teacher education settings. We are two teacher educator-researchers who are white, middle-class and female. We share a commitment to challenging inequities through literacy instruction in both settings. In this session, we present our reflections alongside of our research questions that address how novice teachers and teacher educators talk about and implement instructional practices to challenge inequities in two different settings. We invite our NRC colleagues to join us in a dialogue about how we can problematize dominant perspectives and work towards equity through research and teaching.

Theoretical Framework
Our studies are grounded in socio-cultural theories of language and literacy and critical pedagogy in teacher education. We view literacy, and literacy instruction, as a political act that can serve to challenge, enforce, or reconstruct societal norms and values (Comber & Simpson, 2001). We see teachers, both those we work with and ourselves, as change agents who can transform our own lives, students’ lives, and communities they serve (Giroux, 1988). Literacy instruction can be used to maintain the status quo or empower children to question social inequality in critical ways (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1988).

Viewing literacy instruction as a political act requires an awareness of the norms, values, and beliefs that are promoted and/or ignored about language and literacy (Gee, 2000). Texts and language in general, are tools that can be used to shape particular views of the world (Gee, 1996). As Second Author (2007) has noted, literacy is a means through which we construct our identities and determine our value and self-worth within a community. Texts, as creations of social, cultural, and historical representations of world views, serve as ways for students to further develop their literate identities as well as construct identities for those they read about (Hagood, 2002). By engaging in critical practices and issues of equity, teachers can help students learn to question texts, the world around them, and the identities they take on and place onto others.
Critical pedagogy then provides a medium through which teachers can begin to disrupt existing structures that undermine equity in and outside of classrooms, while positioning learners as proactive agents of change (Giroux, 1988). Texts become more than documents meant to impart knowledge or entertain readers. Instead of focusing solely on skills, readers actively engage in uncovering political messages and take control over how they interpret and then act in relation to those messages (Ciardiello, 2004). Reading from a critical perspective then requires taking an active stance that allows for multiple interpretations and rejects the view that texts are neutral.

**Research Methodology**

**Study #1**

In the teacher education setting, fifty-eight pre-service teachers from three literacy methods courses were asked to select and read one of five books (Ballenger, 1999; Compton-Lily, 2003; Dyson, 2003; Lewis, 2001, McCarthey, 2002). These books illustrated the challenges that can arise when working with diverse learners, provided frameworks for considering how to connect literacy instruction to students’ lives, and helped teachers consider literacy in a socio-cultural and political context. Four to five teachers made up each book club group. Book clubs met once a week for 30 minutes over a period of five weeks. Before each meeting, teachers composed a two-paragraph written response. Teachers spent the first 15 minutes engaged in small group discussions and the final 15 minutes were spent engaged in whole class discussions where teachers could examine issues that cut across groups.

**Data Sources**

*Questionnaires.* Pre-service teachers completed questionnaires at the start and end of the study. The questionnaires asked them to discuss: (a) their prior experiences working with children, (b) what influences teachers’ instructional decisions when planning for literacy instruction, (c) how to help students improve their reading and writing abilities, and (d) how students’ social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds might shape the ways they provided literacy instruction. With the exception of asking about prior experiences, the second questionnaire was the same as the first.

*Written responses.* Pre-service teachers completed a two-paragraph response to each reading. Five responses were collected per participant (290 total responses). Responses were used to help teachers think through what they were reading, facilitate their weekly discussions, and to document their understandings.

*Discussions.* Pre-service teachers participated in two types of discussions: (a) small group discussions with others who read the same text and (b) whole class discussions. Small group discussions lasted approximately 15 minutes and 10 out of 12 groups volunteered to be audio-taped resulting in 50 small group discussions being recorded and transcribed. Whole class discussions lasting 15 minutes immediately followed small group discussions and were audio-taped.

*Final response paper.* Pre-service teachers completed a two-page paper after they had completed all book club activities. They were asked to address the following questions: (a) what did you learn from reading this book, (b) now that you have finished this book, what do you realize you need to learn more about, and (c) how did the ideas in this book influence your thinking about literacy instruction? Two weeks were given to complete the paper.
Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by course section and then by text in order to identify any influence the instructor or a particular text may have had. Then data was analyzed across all sections and texts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All small group and whole class discussions were transcribed. Short answer responses were read and re-read, as were pre and post questionnaires, final papers, and transcriptions to identify patterns. Codes were assigned to the identified patterns.

A time-ordered matrix was next created to identify any trends or changes in teachers’ discussions and to note if any findings were specific to a particular book or section. Second Author looked across pattern codes within the matrix to determine the assertions that could be made. Once assertions were identified, Second Author reread the pattern codes and determined which assertion, if any, they served as evidence for. The matrix was then examined to identify any counter-evidence or limitations for each assertion that might exist. Pattern codes were placed under the appropriate assertion.

Study #2

In the second-grade classroom setting, an ethnographic case study (Merriam, 1998) was conducted to observe how a novice teacher, Lisa (pseudonym), began to integrate theory into practice. Lisa is white, middle-class, and in her 3rd year of teaching in a rural Midwestern farming community. Lisa wanted to study her own efforts to integrate critical literacy and multicultural literature, and First Author was interested in how teachers integrate theory into practice. Together they collaborated for one year and supported each others’ inquiries.

Data Sources

Participant Observation Notes. Second Author visited Lisa once a week for two hours. Field notes were collected during each visit to document activities, conversations, and interactions between Lisa and her students. Observations focused primarily on instructional interactions and literacy events enacted by the students and Lisa.

Written Reflections. Lisa and First Author completed journal entries of approximately one page per week. Lisa’s reflections rendered her thoughts and feelings about how the literacy events addressed her intended goals and how the students responded. Lisa’s entries tended to focus primarily on student responses and her evaluation of whether or not they were becoming more critical with texts. My researcher reflections focused primarily on Lisa’s interactions and dialogue with students during that session.

Final Report. Lisa agreed to share her final written report for her action research project as data in this study. Her report was a combination of a portfolio of student work and a final paper that analyzed her teaching practice with critical literacy in her second grade classroom. This data source allowed First Author to triangulate the emerging themes found in the journal entries and researcher field notes.

Interview. At the end of the academic year, a semi-structured ethnographic interview (Spradley, 1980) was conducted to record Lisa’s summative reflections. First Author asked a series of questions that focused on the themes that had emerged during the year. The interview was open-ended to allow for a natural progression and follow-up questions.

Data Analysis
A naturalistic stance (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to position Lisa’s written reflections as the entry point for data analysis in order to keep the focus on her perspectives in the classroom. Lisa’s written reflections were catalogued by date and studied for contrastive themes at the half year point. First Author followed Spradley’s (1980) thematic analysis techniques, in which an inductive process is used to identify cultural domains and contrasting patterns. Written reflections were read and reread until themes began to emerge. This kind of analysis was further informed by Gee’s (1999) discourse analysis, which helps to locate situated meanings within the narratives. Further analysis of field notes, the final paper, and interview were also analyzed within the same thematic framework (Spradley, 1980). The findings reported in this session address three major themes that emerged over time and were triangulated across all data sources.

**Results/Conclusions**

*What does it mean to be literate?* Pre-service teachers used their book clubs as a way to explore what it meant to help students become literate citizens. In 75% percent of the small-group discussions, pre-service teachers addressed the role of reading and writing skills. They noted that skills were “just one piece to being literate.” Thus, the concept of being literate was viewed as highly social and interactive. Pre-service teachers expected students to utilize their literacy skills to engage with texts to create deeper understandings and solve problems in their lives and communities. For them, literacy instruction and the reading and writing of texts lead to connecting ideas in texts to problems in society.

*What might equitable literacy instruction look like?* Pre-service teachers also focused on how to create equitable literacy instruction that would allow their students to become literate citizens. Ninety percent of the small group discussions and 100% of whole class discussions spent at least a third of their time talking about how to develop such instruction. Pre-service teachers focused on the value of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) (Banks, et al, 2005). Twenty-six percent discussed CRT as a way, “…to help connect home and school and make things more relevant for students….giving them a real purpose for why we read and write,” while 60% focused on how CRT “…values students’ backgrounds and heritage and draws on those things to help kids talk about books or when they write.”

*Do schools really value equitable literacy instruction?* Pre-service teachers questioned the extent to which schools value and want equitable literacy instruction for all students in both their written documents and in their discussions. Although 90% regularly stated or wrote that helping students become literate was about more than teaching them skills, they also stated that schools rarely took into account social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Forty pre-service teachers (69%) noted that there were inconsistencies regarding the current literature on literacy instruction and what they saw being practiced in schools. Finally, they noted that the emphasis on test scores could foster inequitable literacy instruction.

*Recognizing Dominant Power Structures.* As Lisa began her journey with critical literacy in her second grade classroom, the very first challenge she faced was in planning a unit on family and community. Lisa struggled with the idea of addressing dominant power structures when it came to single-gender headed families who are typically marginalized in elementary school curriculums (Gilmore & Bell, 2006). Given the
conservative rural community she taught in, she became fearful of facing community recourse if she used the children’s book *And Tango Makes Three* (Parnell & Richardson, 2005), a story based on a true account of two male penguins in Central Park who nurtured an egg and became a family of three. We discussed how her choice of texts was an important decision that relates to equity and does one of two things; it maintains traditional perspectives or presents alternative or multiple perspectives.

**Reflections on the Critical Use of Resources.** During a unit plan on Native Americans, Lisa learned that helping students critically engage with issues of equity depended on more than exposing them to artifacts and texts. She found that she needed to plan effectively, select quality resources, and facilitate dialogue around the critical issues raised within those resources. Examples demonstrating Lisa’s thinking about how she integrated resources across the curriculum successfully and regretfully will be presented.

**Making Issues of Equity Explicit.** As the school year progressed, First Author observed that Lisa began to make issues of equity explicit more often in her interactions with students. The notes and reflections indicated a growing sense of confidence and courage to become more critical during instruction. For example, Lisa began to comfortably connect critical global issues of war and immigration in ways that allowed students to question and critique what is fair and how others should be treated. She also directly connected current events with her curriculum plans on core democratic values of equality and freedom.

**Interest and Connection to NRC Audience**

We invite NRC colleagues to join us in reflecting about the importance of including ourselves in the process of creating more equitable literacy practices in schools. Our work with teachers can support their work with children. Teachers and teacher educators can foster new understandings about inequities and work to address them in our professional roles. We challenge ourselves and others to continue to face discomfords while reflecting on professional and personal literacy practices. In this way, learning will continue as we push towards creating more open spaces for equity within and beyond our classrooms.
References


