Redefining the Teaching of Literature in the Primary School as Meaning Construction[1]

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Abstract

This article argues that the majority of South African children are alienated from both the culture involved in the curriculum and the nature of teaching in their classrooms. Various facets of the formal and hidden curricula often function to silence students. This is especially apparent in the area of literature teaching, which seems to be increasingly unconnected to the real lives of students. I therefore address the urgent need to make literature teaching at the primary school level more personally meaningful to students. I examine two issues relevant to curriculum development: firstly, the selection of texts for pupils in the primary school and secondly, the reconceptualization of methodologies used in literature teaching and learning.

1 Introduction

In the large majority of South African schools, it has become apparent that what counts as legitimate knowledge has always had close connections to those groups who have had economic, political, and cultural power. Within these learning contexts, students whose knowledge is most closely allied to what is considered the dominant knowledge are privileged and legitimatized. In contrast, there are other learners who see their life experiences as distant from the dominant learning culture. Various aspects of the formal and hidden curricula often function to silence students. The result is that the majority of South African children are increasingly alienated from the culture involved in the curriculum and from the nature of the teaching in their classrooms. The issues that are raised are frequently removed from and irrelevant to their life experiences. Many educators have been concerned about the sense of meaninglessness that pervades the classrooms in which the large majority of children in this country learn. This is especially apparent in the area of literature teaching, which seems to be increasingly unconnected to the real lives of students.

This paper focuses on the urgent need to make teaching literature at the primary school level more personally meaningful to students. It also explores issues centred on the teaching of literature in the primary school within the framework of critical literacy—a term associated with the work of Freire (Freire & Macedo 1987). According to Aronowitz and Giroux (1985:132),

> critical literacy implies 'helping students, teachers, and others learn how to read the world and their lives critically and relatedly. It means developing a deeper understanding of how knowledge gets produced, sustained, legitimatized, and more

1. This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the *Ninth Conference on South African Literature*, 'Pedagogics of Reconstruction: Teaching Literature in a "New" South Africa', Bad Boll, Germany, 14-16 October 1994.

importantly, it points to social action.

In addition, I examine two issues relevant to curriculum development: firstly, the selection of texts for pupils in the primary school, and secondly, the reconceptualization of methodologies used to teach and learn literature.

2 Examining children's literature in our schools

The first question to ask is, 'whose knowledge is presented in and communicated by the texts we use at our schools?'. It is naive to think of the school curriculum as having neutral knowledge. What counts as legitimate knowledge is always the result of complex power relations among class, race, gender, and religious groups. Furthermore, books are published and distributed among the masses within political and economic constraints of power. Apple and Christian-Smith (1991) explain that books signify through their form and content particular constructions of reality and particular ways of selecting and organizing knowledge. These authors contend that books represent

> someone's selection, someone's vision of legitimate knowledge, one that in the process of enfranchising one group's cultural capital disenfranchises another's (Apple & Christian-Smith 1991:4).

Thus, the selection of knowledge for schools is an ideological process, one that serves the interests of particular classes and social groups. It legitimatizes existing social relations and the status of those who dominate. It does so in a way that implies that there are no alternative versions of the world.

It is common knowledge that children's books used in the majority of black schools in South Africa have in many ways alienated our students. The concerns of one Soweto teacher cited in Christie (1985:149) were as follows:

> The reading books are all about white middle class children in England. This bears no relation to the culture of black children in Soweto—never mind the rural areas. It has nothing to do with the world they experience outside of school. These kinds of books do nothing to instil a love of reading in black children.

The experience my students and I have had in historically Indian schools in Durban is similar. Children's books in classrooms and school libraries have been delimiting for children in those school contexts. Class, gender, and race bias have been widespread in the materials. Books give the impression that there is no real diversity in society and there are no problematic social issues. All too often, 'legitimate' knowledge does not include the historical experiences and cultural expressions of the children who are required to read them.

For the most part, the only books students in the primary schools are exposed to are basal readers, and their supplementary books. Some of these reading schemes are, *The Gay Way Series*, *The Beehive Series*, *Peeps into Story Land* and *First Aid in English*. These books, including books at the upper levels such as standard four and five, portray British lifestyles and use speech associated with the British middle class. It is of even greater concern that these books continue to be used despite the fact that most historically

Indian schools are now desegregated—in the sense that large numbers of African students have been enrolled. The books do little to help South African children learn about issues related to diversity or even to learn that such issues exist, or to develop an understanding of different cultural groups in the country and more importantly, how these groups experience life and how knowledge of other indigenous groups and cultures can help children define themselves.

In African schools in Kwazulu/Natal, teachers continue to make use of *The New Day by Day English Course* published by Maskew Miller and *English Readers for Southern Africa* published by Via Africa Limited as the sole reading materials. Again, even books at the standard four and five levels have stereotypical stories about African people and also contain many gender stereotypes. They portray African people across many roles but do not reflect the group's particular experiences. Such stories contain inaccurate and unauthentic portrayals of the experience of African people. Although they may present stories about interpersonal issues such as the interaction between children at school, they avoid presenting social issues. Some of the stories depict rural scenes but nothing about the power relationships in the lives of rural parents, children, teachers, schools and the farm owners with whom the lives of the people are inextricably bound. The books do not deal with the particular pressures on human relationships in South Africa.

Some schools are making use of what are referred to as 'second language reading materials'. I have had the opportunity to examine some of these materials. The books feature mainly black children and adults, mainly middle class families, rural or urban. None of the stories reflect the lived realities of the people. They reflect experiences that are largely generic. Most stories do not portray people and situations having identifiable ethnic content. They tend to show blacks participating in mainstream cultural activities and speaking standard English. It is likely that this is done to avoid stereotyping. However, it is clear that in the process, authentic experiences and positive cultural differences are ignored. Social class difference is not treated in these books at all. Problems among people are reflected as individual in nature and are ultimately resolved. The idea that people are collectives appears rarely.

Few teachers recognise the political facts about school life and school literacy. Teachers do not realize how schools can function to disempower our pupils, for example, by providing them with knowledge that is not relevant to, nor speaks to the context of their everyday lives. The curriculum is defined so that the majority of pupils are taught only those skills which are seen as necessary to enable them to read and write with accuracy and to make limited decisions—creating what is referred to as functional literacy. Our classrooms emphasize the mechanical learning of reading skills. In our primary schools, the work of the teacher is to 'transmit' knowledge and the task of students is to receive it. Both teachers and students follow a passive routine day after day. Classrooms are organized, subjected to routine, controlled and predictable. Reading programmes are organized around inequalities—with students grouped according to ability, language differences,

and if one is more analytical, social class. In the majority of classes, teachers direct students' attention to the mechanics of reading a text, for example, phonic characteristics of isolated words and literal interpretations of the text. There is no sense of independence or creative excitement in reading lessons. Students seem to be socialized for subordination rather than socialized to take responsibility for their own learning. Students have no control over their own learning, over the texts, and over their meanings. There is no emphasis on the negotiated and shared aspects of reading literature.

3 Redefining the teaching of literature: critical literacy

Critical literacy views literacy as a social construction 'that is always implicated in organizing one's view of history, the present and the future' (Freire & Macedo 1987:25). Since literacy is a precondition for cultural and social transformation, its objective is to extend the possibilities for individuals to participate in the understanding and transformation of their society.

According to Freire and Macedo (1987:32), literacy is both a narrative for agency and a referent for critique. As a *narrative for agency*, literacy attempts to rescue history, experience and vision from conventional discourse and dominant social relations. It provides the conditions for individuals to locate themselves in their own histories and to see themselves as agents in the struggle to expand the possibilities of human life. These authors explain that to be literate is not to be free but to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one's voice, history and future. Human agency does not imply that the production of meaning is limited to analyzing particular texts. Literacy is a social construction aimed at the enhancement of human possibility. As a *referent of critique*, literacy plays a role in helping individuals understand the socially constructed nature of their society and their experience.

The aim of developing a critical literacy is to broaden our conceptions of how teachers actively produce, sustain, and legitimatize meaning and experience in the classroom. It provides an understanding of how the wider conditions of society produce, negotiate, transform and bear down on the conditions of teaching so as to either enable or disable teachers from acting in a critical manner.

The critical literacy approach provides crucial insight into the learning process by linking the nature of learning itself with the dreams, experiences, histories and languages that students bring to the schools. It stresses the need for teachers to confirm student experiences so that students are legitimatized and supported as people who matter, people who can participate in their learning, and people who can speak with a voice that is rooted in their sense of history and place. Schools often give the appearance of transmitting a common culture, but more often than not, they legitimatize what can be called a dominant culture. The dominant culture often sanctions the voices of middle class students, while simultaneously disconfirming or ignoring the voices from other groups, whether they are black, working class, women, disabled, or minorities.

Teachers need to understand how schools, as part of the wider

dominant culture, often function to marginalize the experiences, and histories that the majority of our students use in mediating their lives. Student experience, like the culture and society of which it is a part, is not without conflicts. It is important to sort through its contradictions, and to give students a chance not only to confirm themselves, but to understand the richness and strengths of other cultural traditions and other voices.

It is necessary, then, to clarify the distinction between child-centred approaches and critical literacy. Child-centred approaches claim that schools thwart children's activity by treating them as passive receptacles, and by using repressive methods of instruction. This led to approaches based in process writing, psycholinguistics, and whole-language-acquisition and more recently, constructivist approaches. These approaches suggest that teaching must proceed according to the child's nature. They emphasize the need to give children choice and control over their learning. In contrast, critical pedagogy begins with an acknowledgement of differential power within society and within schools. Teachers are not free, and students cannot really progress according to their nature. Shannon (1992) explains that under such unequal and unjust conditions, the task of the school and the teacher is to intervene within the context of unequal social forces. The implication that this intervention which will bring about social justice and equality of opportunity.

Critical literacy stresses self-knowledge, social critique, and social action based on this new knowledge. Child-centred approaches neglect the political reality of the forces which are opposed to efforts to help children learn and develop. Critical theory stresses that the role of schooling in a democracy should be to redistribute useful social and academic knowledge equally in order to prepare students for life.

In the teaching of literature, developing a critical literacy implies that the classroom is in the most fundamental sense a place of conflict where teachers and students interrogate the knowledge, history, visions, language, and culture through books. Teachers must develop conditions in the classroom where different voices are heard and legitimatized. In order to improve the quality of life and citizenship of students, teachers must create social relations that allow students to speak and to appreciate the nature of differences both as a basis for democratic tolerance and as a fundamental condition for critical dialogue.

According to Giroux (1992), the notion of voice is developed around a politics of difference and community. It does not merely stress plurality—which is present in most multicultural literature—but emphasizes human community. This approach dignifies plurality as part of an ongoing effort to develop social relations in which all voices with their differences are heard. Teachers need to ensure that there are multiple voices in the classroom. The challenging task is to find ways in which these voices can interrogate each other. This involves dialogue (or struggle) over the interpretation and over the meanings constructed. Such dialogues expand individual experience and redefine individual identities. Simon (1992:144) explains this position when he elaborates on the approach of critical literacy:

> Teaching and learning must be linked to the goal of educating students to take risks, to struggle with on-going relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of the world which is 'not yet'—in order to be able to alter the grounds upon which life is lived.

This brief overview of critical literacy and how it differs from traditional and child-centred approaches provides the context for the question, 'Which books should be used in the teaching and learning process?'.

4 Selecting children's literature

It is important that teachers understand that conflicts over the selection of texts relate to wider questions of power relations. They need to see that texts can either uphold and enforce unequal socially constructed relations or function as tools of liberation and empowerment and instil tolerance in pupils. It is clear that children's books presented in our classrooms thus far have reflected one version of reality—a version that embodies certain interests, certain interpretations, certain value judgements, and gives prominence to dominant knowledge(s) while rendering others invisible. In this section, I provide a few guidelines for the responsible selection and use of texts in the classroom as part of the critical literacy approach.

Teachers need to understand *how texts and classroom relations, interactions, and teacher-talk often function to actively silence students*. Teachers should provide students with the opportunity to interrogate knowledge presented and developed in an assortment of texts and other materials.

It is crucial that the *cultural diversity* of our society is reflected in the literature we present to children. Books need to focus on themes related to the intersection of race, gender and culture—the lived experience of people in a multicultural context. The introduction of 'Africanised texts' into our schools is not advocated as one not only wants the faces of our people in our books, but also the voices that populate our multicultural and multilingual society. Books need to present authentic images of society rather than uphold socially constructed ideal relationships. For example, South African books have not reflected on the realities of urbanization.

Books depicting *children with disabilities* are limited. Storylines tend to ignore people with disabilities, missing the opportunity to teach non-disabled people about the contributions that people with disabilities have made to society. They also fail to depict the struggles, strengths, desires and lived experiences of people with disabilities.

Students need to have a knowledge of different *textual materials*, to include the writings not only of one's own and other cultures, but to include the different kinds of materials we encounter in our world. These could vary from story books, pop-songs, cartoons, newspapers, novels, poetry, advertisements, and student- and teacher- produced materials. Students can produce their own life stories and share these with peers.

Another important issue to be addressed is *the nature of the language used* in books. It is necessary to vary the way language is presented and used.

Materials should reflect the variety of ways people in society speak and use language. Millred Taylor, a black American writer, provides brilliantly characterized narratives containing voices of those silenced by society. Her sensitivity to sociocultural and historical concerns is reflected in her narratives. She uses a variety of dialects that reflect the racial and ethnic backgrounds of characters.

A good example of a text that could be useful for teachers who adopt a critical pedagogy has been produced by the South African Council of Higher Education (SACHED 1988). The publication is the comic version of *Down Second Avenue* by Es'kia Mphahlele. The comic describes in pictorial form the experiences of the writer growing up under apartheid, and his decision to go into exile in Nigeria. The comic provides excellent opportunities for the exploration of experiences through language, the identification of what is explicit and what is hidden, and the creation and exploration of relationships. It draws attention to the young Mphahlele's developing consciousness.

I came across a story printed in *The Daily News* (August 1993), entitled *Why did Johnny run away?* The story was taken from a book called *The Stroller*, a tale about the street children of Cape Town written by Lesley Beake and published by Maskew Miller (1987). It depicts this child's lived experiences and how these are bound with social, cultural, economic, political, racial, and class issues. Real life themes emerge, such as school boycotts, youth subculture, the sense of alienation and meaninglessness experienced by children in overcrowded and under-resourced schools and social influences on family relationships. The text provides an excellent opportunity for children to develop understandings of the phenomenon and experiences of street children in relation to the wider society. Similarly, the book entitled *Mellow Yellow* by Jenny Robson tells the story of a Cape Town street child based on a true experience. The story depicts the lived experience of the boy, Mess, and reflects the hopes, dreams, loyalties and innermost thoughts of the characters. It has enormous potential to raise various critical issues and themes such as inter-generational issues, gender, inter-racial issues, family and peer relationships. A critical analysis and comparison with *pupils' own stories* can lead to dynamic dialogues in the classroom. Such stories can open up new possibilities for children in terms of the way they perceive themselves and can contribute to their own developing consciousness.

5 Some methodological issues

A basic problem faced by teachers responsible for the teaching and learning of literature in the primary school is that they do not know how to move more decisively from a model that produces and legitimatizes inequality to a model of critical literacy teaching. Freire (see Shor 1987:23) calls for a dialogical education which invites students to critique the larger society through sharing their lives, and enables them to locate their experiences socially, to become involved in probing the social factors that make and limit them and to reflect on who they are and who they could be. Freire and Macedo (1987) view literacy as an effort to read the text and the world dialectically.

O'Loughlin (1992) argues that the most fundamental building block in a critical pedagogy is acknowledgement of the life experiences and voices of our students. As Freire (Horton & Freire 1991:57) puts it during a conversation with Horton about educational practice:

> When students come, of course, they bring with them, inside of them, in their bodies, in their lives, they bring their hopes, despair, expectations, knowledge which they got by living, by fighting, by becoming frustrated. Undoubtedly, they don't come here empty. They arrive here full of things. In most of the cases, they bring with them opinions about the world, and about life.

Teachers' most important task is to affirm not only the individuality of students but their personhood and their experiences. They must allow them to voice their thoughts and examine their experiences. Central to the construction of knowledge is the creation of a safe community in which students are comfortable enough with themselves, their fellow students as well as the teacher to take the risk of sharing themselves and engaging in public examination of deeply held beliefs, thoughts and feelings. Horton (Horton & Freire 1991) noted that this process requires the building of trust as well as a determined effort by the teacher to relinquish the role of expert in the classroom.

Teachers need to see that the language and discourse found in books are not neutral. Teachers need to 'read' the various relationships between writer, reader, and reality that language and discourse produce.

We need to build communities of learners and thinkers in our classrooms. Literature lessons must be seen as opportunities for reflection and meaning construction. Language plays an active role in constructing experience. Vygotsky (1962; see Cole 1978) stressed this when he elaborated on the fact that shared social behaviour is the source of learning and that education is an effect of community. Students need to share interpretations and hypotheses about texts based on their unique lived experiences. This does not simply imply that students must be given opportunities to talk in class. Teachers need to assess whether students are talking on their own terms or only in terms of the dominant discourses of school and society.

Children must be given opportunities to bring their own unique social, cultural and historical experiences which impact on the meaning making process to the classroom. All students possess multiple and contradictory frames of reference with which to construct knowledge. These include their ethnic background, race, class, gender, language usage, religious, cultural and political identities. The potential for knowledge construction depends on how teachers react to students' attempts to employ these diverse frameworks for meaning making. As Horton (1990) illustrated in his work at Highlander Folk School, true learning can only take place when people are given the opportunity to construct knowledge for themselves, on their own terms so that they can act to change their worlds. Critical literacy increases awareness of the contradictions hidden or distorted by everyday understandings.

Teaching from such a paradigm would involve the building of a critical community in the classrooms. In such an environment, students and teachers can be empowered to re-think their world and their own place in it. If pupils'

responses to literature are seen as forms of self-definition, then stories can be read with the following thoughts uppermost in our minds: 'What message does this have for me?'; 'Can this be possible?'; 'How would I behave in a similar set of circumstances?'; 'How does it affect my relationship with others?'; 'How does it improve my understanding of myself, my community and society?'.

I believe that it is time that more teachers accept the challenge of becoming agents in the process of critical literacy—despite possible opposition. If we do it at primary school level, our children as well as society in general will certainly reap the benefits in time.

6 Conclusion

Critical literacy requires that teachers understand that they are dealing with children whose stories, memories, narratives, and readings are inextricably related to wider social, political, economic situations. Teachers are in the position to provide the critical and reconstructive space in which children can sort through their contradictions, conflicts, confirm themselves and gain understanding about the richness of other cultures and other voices. Such an approach contextualizes literature for our children and legitimatizes the histories they bring to the classroom. It is believed that such an approach to literature will also instil in children a love for reading.

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