

Strength in Numbers

A Collaborative Self-Study of Critical Literacy Across Teacher Education Contexts

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As teacher educators from across the United States, we are committed to foregrounding critical literacy in our courses. Critical literacy is a pedagogical approach that focuses on the political, sociological, historical, and economic forces that shape our lives as we work towards equitable, democratic societies (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). It prepares students to read, write, and act for justice into their adult lives. While critical literacy is increasingly important in a global society, the pressures of standardization in teacher education coursework is in tension with engagement in these practices.

While our teacher candidates (TCs) have many strengths, they have been immersed in the audit culture of education that incentivizes the adoption of prescriptive P-12 curricula tied to high-stakes testing (Apple, 2004). This dominant model is consumed with standards and achievement testing. Experiencing literacy as assessment has shaped the way many TCs view teaching and learning (c.f. Lortie, 1975). Their perspectives are commensurate with current reforms that further de-center critical literacy in teacher education.

One such reform is the instantiation of assessments of professional teacher preparation programs like edTPA, a teacher performance assessment required for teacher certification in many U.S. states. The edTPA is a reform initiative intended to make certification processes more aligned to the work that teachers do (planning, teaching, assessing, and reflecting). Though this assessment is not a traditional standardized test, it remains high stakes; consequently, there is still a press in higher education to “teach to the test” (Greenblatt & O’Hara, 2015; Ledwell & Oyler, 2016), further limiting the space to engage in critical literacy.

Additionally, many teacher education programs in the United States have moved towards practice-based teacher education (PBTE). PBTE is an initiative intended to mitigate theory-practice gaps by preparing TCs with practices to teach all students across all contexts (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman et al., 2009). While there is evidence that PBTE can contribute to more effective, responsive teaching (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017), there are concerns that PBTE narrows teacher education to a set of enacted competencies without developing the deep understanding and cultural competence needed to teach responsively and critically (Zeichner, 2015).

To push back on these factors and re-center critical literacy in our courses, this study reports how teacher educators employed collaborative self-study (Martin & Dismukes, 2015; O’Dwyer, et al., 2018). We considered the following question: What was the nature of our group collaboration as we co-constructed changes regarding critical literacy in our methods courses?

Theoretical Framework

Critical literacy is a pedagogical approach that focuses on forces that shape our lives (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Rooted in the work of Freire (2018), critical literacy is grounded in feminist, critical, and sociocultural theories of language, literacy, and power (Comber,

1998; Gee, 1996; Street, 2001). Critical literacies are recursive and reflexive practices foregrounding lived concerns of power, identity, and agency in literacy pedagogy. An overarching theme of these practices is the understanding that anything constructed through language is informed by perspectives and ideological beliefs (conscious or not). Therefore, it can be deconstructed to be better understood (Jones, 2006).

According to critical literacy tenets, learning to read is far more than just cracking the code or understanding an author's meaning. Rather, the goal of critical literacy is to challenge the status quo. The goal of critical literacy in teacher education is to raise TCs' responsiveness toward societal problems in their world, prompting candidates to ask why things are the way they are, to question who profits the most, and then to act, both inside and outside of the classroom, to make the world a better place. We argue that the tenets of critical literacy are essential in teacher education courses.

Methods

Collaboration has been identified as an essential element of self-study (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009), and the value of collaborative self-study has been highlighted mainly for teacher educators as early-career academics (Bullock & Ritter, 2011; Fletcher & Bullock, 2012; Petrarca & Bullock, 2014; Richards & Ressler, 2016). Specifically, collaborative self-study offers an opportunity to disrupt the isolation teacher educators face (Martin et al., 2011; Snow & Martin, 2014) and 'catalyse' (Brown & Duguid, 1996) the development of a community of practice. This community can be a source of support for mutual learning and planning, as participants work across boundaries of their own knowledge, skills, and experiences to access and reflect upon others' knowledge, explore from more than one perspective, and question individual understandings more critically (LaBoskey, 2007; Loughran, 2005).

(Martin & Dismuke, 2015). In this shared space, openness and interrogation are necessary (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000), as self-study researchers engage as critical friends to problematize practice, (Samaras & Freese, 2009) and “challenge the niceties” (Fletcher et al., 2016).

Research has focused on collaborative self-study for academics within the same institution (Martin & Dismuke, 2015; O’Dwyer et al., 2019). The value of this study is that it builds on prior collaborative self-studies between two or three teacher educators to include nine teacher educators in both public and private institutions. More information is needed to understand how teacher educators can use collaborative self-study to improve practice across institutions. O’Sullivan (2014) argues that self-study must aspire to use more expansive formats, and collaboration across institutions answers this call.

Participants

Nine teacher educators in the U.S. participated in this collaborative self-study. The group was formed at the Teacher Education Research Study Group of the 2018 Literacy Research Association conference. We discovered that we shared an interest in exploring tensions between our instructional aspirations regarding critical literacy and our enacted practices (Dinkleman, 2003; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000). While our experiences as educators varied, (See Table 1) we all self-identified as white, middle class, cisgender females. We are mindful that this positionality shapes the way we read and are read in this study and in our practice.

Sites and Contexts

We each selected one methods course for focused inquiry. Data was collected from seven elementary methods courses and two middle/secondary methods courses. We represent nine universities in

seven U.S. states. (See Table 1). The TCs enrolled in our courses were from rural, suburban, and urban settings; some were nontraditional and first-generation students.

We each experienced tensions shaped by our geographic locations. The challenges of different state and regional policies added to the complexity of integrating critical literacy into our courses. Our individual institutions varied in the emphasis placed upon edTPA preparation and PBTE, as well as orientations towards critical literacy. For example, some of us worked in departments committed to diversity and equity, while others worked in departments where they felt isolated in these commitments.

Table 1

Participants

| Participant | Years in Teacher Education as Professors | Rank | Geographic Location | University Type | Focal Course |
|--------------------|---|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Amy (A) | 2 | Assistant Professor | Southeast | Mid-size Public | Social Studies Methods |
| Elizabeth (B) | 6 | Associate Professor | Northeast | Small, Private, Liberal Arts | Literacy in Childhood Classrooms |
| Kathy (C) | 7 | Associate Professor | Northeast | Private | Literacy Methods |
| Kristen (D) | 2 | Assistant Professor | Midwest | Mid-size Public | Reading Methods |
| Nance (E) | 16 | Professor | Northeast | Mid-size public | Literacy Methods |

| | | | | | |
|-------------|----|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Sophie (F) | 14 | Associate Professor | Midwest, Urban | Private | Literacy Methods |
| Tess (G) | 4 | Assistant Professor | Northeast | Mid-size, private | Reading Methods |
| Tierney (H) | 0 | Doctoral Student | Southeast | Large, Public | Reading Education for the Middle Grades |
| Wendy (I) | 12 | Assistant Professor | Pacific Northwest | Private, Liberal Arts | Reading Methods |

Data Sources

Data were generated from January 2019 to August 2019. Data sources include one syllabus from each participant’s methods course (N=9), written journal reflections, group meeting agendas, and notes, and audio and video recordings of monthly group meetings. Data from our journal entries are included in this paper; each participant is indicated by a different letter, and the numbers indicate which reflection in the series of journal entries the quote is drawn from. For example, (A, R5) would indicate Participant A’s fifth reflection.

Knowing that an important part of collaborative self-study is what we learn about our practices and how these did or did not fit with our shared ontology, we regularly completed similar reflective prompts and met virtually to discuss possible classroom implications to sharpen our own evolving understanding of critical literacy. Our reflections focused on our efforts to better foreground critical literacy in our coursework and drew upon shared readings and discussions. The reflections began at the start of the spring semester. We addressed why we felt moral obligations to center critical literacy in methods courses. As the semester continued, reflections often focused on opportunities to incorporate critical literacy in our classes as well

as some struggles we had with critical incidents. Prompts such as “What significant instructional changes are you considering or have you implemented based on your perceived understanding of critical literacy for K-12 instruction?” helped guide our reflections. These written reflections were stored in a shared drive and enabled each of us to document our own learning and enabled us to dialogue with one another, problematize our practice, and deepen our deliberations, providing us with the space to bring scholarship into our pedagogy (O’Dwyer et al., 2019; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began well before data collection was completed. Collaborative self-study allowed us to use our analysis of initial findings throughout data collection to flexibly adjust the study as it continued (Corsaro, 1981; Byrd, 2015). Thus, we did not view data analysis as one isolated incident; rather, data analysis was ongoing, using constant comparative techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

A sub-group worked as internal critical friends and used open coding to identify three codes based on our research questions, noting words or phrases such as “definition,” “balancing,” and “resistance” (Emerson et al., 1995; O’Dwyer et al., 2019). The collaborative nature of our self-study played a significant role in crystalizing our analysis as initial open codes were discussed collectively by the group. Then, the whole group worked as external critical friends to consolidate and condense our codes. The size and variety of experiences of our group allowed us to examine “the interpretations that emerge from analysis from as many angles and perspectives as possible” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, p. 152).

Next, we utilized focused coding (Emerson et al., 1995) to re-analyze the data based on the three themes. Using content analysis (Miles et al., 2013), we examined our syllabi, journal reflections, meeting notes,

and agendas and applied codes for defining critical literacy, balancing practice and theory, and forms of resistance. We initially coded individually, and then reviewed one another’s coding to ensure we were in agreement. Table 2 shows a sample of our coding scheme, evidence was selected as representative of the 30-45 examples identified for each theme across the journal entries. Following Craig (2009), we addressed trustworthiness in this study by employing the following tenets: intentional human action linked to human knowledge growth; socially and contextually situated; engaging selves and others in interrogating aspects of teaching and learning by ‘storying’ experience; implicating identities and developing meaning and knowledge.

Table 2

Sample Coded Data

| Critical Literacy Code | Data Source |
|---|--|
| Uncovering ideological beliefs | Critical literacy is still somewhat elusive to me and I think that’s because different people define it in different ways...This is where the elusivity of critical literacy comes in for me... (C, R5) |
| Challenging the status quo in methods courses | It makes sense to re-design both courses from a critical perspective. But, how? What texts might I use? I changed the course text in both courses and students complained that they didn’t learn enough about the “basics” of how to teach young children to “read.” (D, R2) |

Interrogating
whiteness

I feel like my university's recent focus on practice-based teaching has shifted my own focus, and this has been nagging at me for several years.

There are some faculty members who say that good teaching is good teaching, and that if we can get our students to be able to teach literacy practices competently and confidently, this should address inequities in and of itself. I disagree. I think we need to do a better job in our own classes to highlight culturally responsive pedagogy. (F, R1)

Findings

Three themes emerged from the analysis. The first theme related to our struggle to define critical literacy for ourselves and our students, and the work of the group to articulate a shared ontology we hoped to enact through our practice. Our second theme expressed our challenges in weaving together more traditionally “neutral” methods and critical literacy practices consistently throughout our courses. We shared assignments, readings, and engaged as critical friends to problematize practice (Samaras & Freese, 2009) and maintain our commitment to critical literacy. Our final theme reflected the resistance (both internal and external) experienced and the ways in which the shared space of the group fostered risk-taking (Martin & Dismuke, 2015), vulnerability, and accountability for interrogating our positionalities despite challenges.

Critical Literacy: Uncovering Ideological Beliefs

The struggle to define critical literacy as a theoretical framework, and not a single concept, emerged during our first meetings. Though we shared a commitment to enacting critical literacy in our practice, we did not have a common definition nor could we articulate how critical

literacy might be operationalized across disciplines. It is possible that our assumption that we held a common definition was rooted in our shared identity positions, specifically our identification as white, middle-class, cisgender women. In particular, we found it difficult to differentiate the ways in which the concept of critical literacy was inextricably entwined with other concepts, such as social justice, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and critical whiteness studies, as shown below:

While critical literacy is not the same as social justice, I view critical literacy as the foundation to an understanding of the word (and the world) that can lead to social justice and the taking of action against injustice and inequity. (H, R2)

Due to the variety of our contexts, education, and geographic locations, we each brought our own conceptions of critical literacy, which both complicated and enhanced the work of the groups. While many of us feel isolated in the work we do at our individual institutions, the opportunity to collaborate and form a community with critical friends who shared our commitments to justice and equity in education was a valuable contribution to our professional lives. Our written reflections indicated those shared commitments, as well as a shared understanding that critical literacy was not compatible with a “teacher as technician” stance and that an over-emphasis on PBTE could obscure commitments to larger aims of applying critical literacy as a lens to inform teaching. The degree to which these aspects of the profession were emphasized at our individual institutions varied, as did our senses of self-efficacy in pushing back against those constraints. As we deepened our commitments to one another, our commitments to enacting pedagogy aligned with our goals deepened. For example:

I am grateful to have a group that helps press my thinking, teaching, and provides support (resources, feedback, shared experiences) for continued efforts. (I, R4) We gained a sense of confidence in enacting the work we believed in because the community helped us plan and reflect on our practice and held us accountable for continuing to improve.

At our inaugural meeting in December 2018, we grappled with a definition of critical literacy. Establishing not only a literal definition but also a broader shared ontology, was a necessary first step in our collaborative self-study. Although our definition of critical literacy continues to evolve, we realize that it is the process of collaboration and not the specific definition that has and continues to impact our practice and commitment to critical literacy. Many of us reflected on the value of our group meetings, such as in the following:

It's been valuable to discuss teaching, brainstorm, and set specific goals knowing there will be follow up with the group. In the business of life, it helps keep me accountable to goals and get/think through ways to expand my pedagogy. I appreciate the opportunity to co-reflect on issues of equity and justice. (I, R5)

While discussing the definition was valuable, the ongoing discussions helped us to continue to integrate our new learning, varied perspectives, and ongoing experiences into an evolving understanding of our beliefs and how to enact them through our practices.

Critical Literacy: Challenging the Status Quo in

Methods Courses

Once we named our shared beliefs around critical literacy, we were able to shift our attention to the ways in which our ontology was reflected (or not) in our practices. This highlighted another tension: we struggled to continually enact critical literacy values and practices in effective ways as other requirements, mandates, or priorities took up valuable space in our classrooms and our calendars. We grappled with how to continue to teach what we viewed as the “essentials” of instruction (e.g. phonics or guided reading), while also expanding our course to consistently engage with critical literacy. Availability of both time and resources to support this expanded focus emerged as roadblocks across contexts and courses. One reflection noted:

I continue finding myself wishing I could do more with my practicum students around critical literacy and issues of social justice, but the quickly moving calendar seems to get the best of me. Our time together is limited...The majority of our time is devoted to case study presentations and discussing particular instances with their tutees. (G, R3)

This theme brought clarity to the ways in which our practice often fell short of our espoused goals and intentions. In addition, this theme revealed that the unearned privilege of our ability to choose to challenge the status quo in methods courses (or not) was shaped by our positionality as white women. At the same time, we reflected upon the instructional changes we successfully made, alongside the many changes we still hope to make, or did not follow through on. These tensions, which we continue to explore, make us and our practice publicly vulnerable through our collaborations. For example,

Despite my surprise and, at times, discomfort in

navigating/facilitating difficult conversations about race, equity and teaching, I believe that if I don't, then I'm complicit in maintaining the status quo. So, I am grateful to have a group that helps press me in my thinking, my teaching; and provides support (resources, feedback, shared experiences) for continued efforts. (I, R4)

In our reflections, we identified the uncomfortable nature of this work, and how the space of our group helped us remain committed. In other ways, we challenged and held one another accountable when we fell short of our shared goals. We also faced the reality that our individual work would not be enough, as indicated in the following reflection:

I just am reminded at the end of the semester that a semester is not enough. The students need to be hearing it in multiple courses, as a foundation and philosophy in how we approach teaching, not just a particular content area. It feels frustrating to know these students are hearing a lot of what I'm teaching for the first time, the semester before student teaching, and to know it likely won't be carried through. (A, R6)

As this example reveals, the nature of collaboration in our research led us to consider the scope of our programs, beyond the confines of our individual courses. We acknowledged the potential of carrying our work beyond a single semester.

Critical Literacy: Interrogating Whiteness

As we sought to change our practice and align our teaching with our beliefs and goals, we experienced resistance from a variety of sources. Some of the resistance was external, such as colleagues who believe

that “good teaching is good teaching” (F, R1), and that methods are neutral, or those who cited partisan politics as a reason for objecting to a social justice mission.

Students were also a source of resistance. Several group members reflected on their course evaluations, which captured some of the objections students posed. One read:

Another factor influencing my reticence with critical literacy in [my course] are a few comments from course evaluations...One student wrote that they felt the class was too political. Conversely, one student wrote that they appreciated the social justice stance I took as an instructor. (D, R1).

These responses sometimes heightened our own anxiety in continuing to center critical literacy as, particularly for newer faculty, course evaluations have the potential to impact retention and tenure.

Additionally, some of the resistance we experienced was internal. We reflected on our discomfort in the work, eventually drawing on our shared reading of *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018) to discuss our “racial stamina.” One group member reflected that “as a white woman, I often feel a bit uncomfortable in having conversations about issues of racial equity, and I wish to address this issue as well, both at my own school and with our group” (F, R1). Acknowledging our discomfort, and coming to understand that we needed to live in that discomfort, were important steps in remaining committed to making changes in our practices. We also shared doubts about our capacity for initiating and responding to challenging conversations in our classrooms, seeking and applying advice from our collaborations in how to address critical incidents. One moment that stood out for a group member was as follows:

...and then [student] said, “Well there were good and bad parts of slavery.” This remark stunned me, because A) it wasn’t a conversationally logical response, as we hadn’t been debating the horror of slavery; and B) it was a horrible thing to say. When I looked at my other students, I could see the shock turning to anger and I fumbled for something to say. (F, R2)

The reflections that we, as white women educators, shared with our group captured the vulnerable and uncertain nature of our pedagogy. Our collaboration allowed us to interrogate these critical incidents in our practice with one another, bearing the burden of unpacking our whiteness and the whiteness of teacher education more broadly without imposing on colleagues of color. The collaborative nature of our shared work helped us navigate the resistance we felt, plan how to address it, and to sustain our work despite it.

Implications

This collaborative self-study contributes to the S-STEP methodology literature in two significant ways. First, it encompasses teacher educators across geographic locations and institutions, connecting teacher educators with similar ontologies and commitments to critical literacy. The diversity of contexts offers additional richness to our data and our collaboration. The shared goals of the group also brought together teacher educators at all ranks in a way that disrupts the typical hierarchy of academia. Rather than a vertical hierarchy, our group developed as a horizontal network in which all members were able to contribute and collaborate as equals.

Second, it suggests that collaborative self-study methodology, with the support of technology, among teacher educators with commitments to critical literacy brought together and sustained a group of individuals at varied institutions and rank for the shared

purpose of improving practice. Previous research demonstrates the value of self-study for early career (Casey & Fletcher, 2012) and also experienced (MacPhail, 2011) educators, as teacher educators often experience feelings of isolation in higher education (Martin et al.; Snow & Martin, 2014). This study adds that collaborative self-study is a plausible research methodology for faculty in different ranks, at varying institutions in different geographical locations, as a vehicle to broadening and strengthening the global community of educators. This methodology allows us to engage in the personal reflexive work necessary for interrogating our whiteness and the whiteness of teacher education. Our collaboration enables us to process critical incidents in our teaching and work towards improving our practice and developing methods for teaching for justice and equity.

We propose that our group's collaborative structure has the potential to formalize collaborative learning among other teacher education groups. The more we practice vulnerability and racial stamina, and the more we push back against an audit culture that produces inequities, the more risks we take, the bolder we become. Through our collaboration, there is also the potential to support TCs in developing the same type of collaborative support network. Teacher educators engaged in collaborative self-study and committed to critical literacy comprise a sphere of influence with the potential to impact broader spheres of educators, children, and communities.

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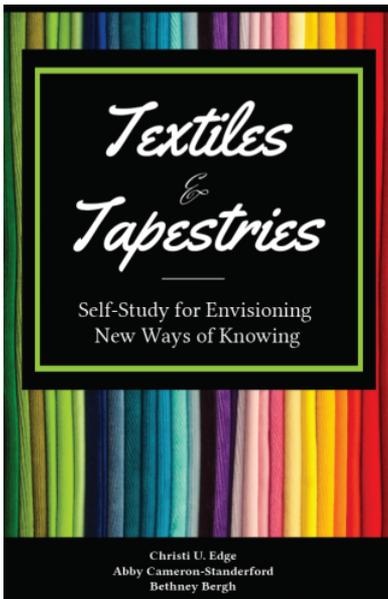
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