Pigs, Cinderella and Social Issues

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Critical literacy, and the pedagogy that supports this theoretical framework, has been articulated by numerous literacy educators and theorists (Edelsky, 1999b; Fehring & Green, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Morgan, 1997). Although attempts to define critical literacy would be considered temporary and provisional, some central concepts of critical literacy and critical pedagogy include; helping students to view knowledge as a historical product (Shor, 1987), getting students to challenge traditional interpretations of literature (Simpson, 1996), helping students understand that literature, in particular children's literature, presents a particular version of reality, not reality itself (Luke & Freebody, 1997), understanding that definitions of literacy are based on ideological constructs that are inherently political (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002), and bringing to the classroom an awareness of the cultural systems and positions of power that are inherent in educational institutions (Creighton, 1997).

A critical literacy perspective values individual empowerment and voice supporting students' interrogations of their readings and experiences in order to understand how meaning is constructed, whose voices are heard, and whose voices are silenced. McLaren (1994) explains, "a student's voice is not a reflection of the world as much as it is a constitutive force that both mediates and shapes reality within historically constructed practices and relationships of power.... Voice, then, suggests the means that students have at their disposal to make themselves 'heard' and to define themselves as active participants in the world" (p. 227).

Critical theory and pedagogy is based on, "the premise that the social negotiations of the rules of proper behavior, laws, and social institutions are not conducted among equals because social, economic, and political circumstances have given certain groups license to assert undue influence over the outcomes" (Stumpf Jongsma, 1991). These unequal negotiations are played out in classrooms everyday, in particular during the reading and discussing of children's literature.

The reading and discussing of children's literature can create a space for students and teachers to question the way the world is represented in literature, analyze the construction of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class, investigate the themes and concepts that connect literature to the lives of students, and provide opportunities for students to generate, share, and negotiate meanings within a community of readers. Within this theoretical space, the literature selected to be read and discussed should support students' interrogation of the ways in which people, like themselves, are represented, and bring to conscious attention the stereotypes and misrepresentations of traditionally underrepresented groups (Harris, 1997). Lewis (2000) suggests, "literature discussions should invite readers to question the discourses that shape their experiences as well as to resist textual ideology that promotes dominant cultural assumption" (p.261). In addition, it is important to problematize the perspectives generally associated with reader response theories that conceptualize the reader as autonomous individuals capable of constructing meaning in isolation (McKormick, 1994). Rather, reading should be viewed as a learned practice of making meaning within a particular discourse, where different ideologies construct different relationships between the author, the reader, and the text in terms of production and legitimation of meanings (O'Neill, 1993).

The role of children's literature in the elementary reading curriculum is not a disinterested process (Taxel, 1999). Theoretical assumptions concerning reading comprehension, and whether meaning is constructed or discovered, affect the role that children's literature plays in reading instruction and assessment. Unfortunately, most classroom teachers have not been exposed to literary theories, nor have been required to take a course in children's literature or literary criticism in their teacher preparation programs (Hoewisch, 2000). This lack of exposure to children's literature and literary theory does not support teacher's interrogations of the theoretical assumptions that underlie their pedagogical decisions,

In other words, critical pedagogy is constructed through the lens of critical theories, and without an understanding of the various social, literary, and educational theories that support this alternative pedagogy, teachers will be challenged to implement changes in their curriculum.

Pedagogical Framework

The pedagogical framework for the literature-based unit of study described here was influenced by Lewison, Seely Flint, & Van Sluys (2002) in which they presented a review of research and professional literature on critical literacy pedagogy. They synthesized the relevant literature into the following dimensions for developing critical pedagogy: 1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice. Disrupting the commonplace is described as seeing common, everyday events through new lenses. In other words, teachers attempt to re-frame events and texts according to systems of power in order to understand how language shapes identity, constructs cultural discourses and supports the status quo (Gee, 1992). In order to interrogate multiple viewpoints, one must consider a topic, phenomenon, or concept from a variety of perspectives. These perspectives may be theoretical, meaning we look at an event or text utilizing a variety of theoretical lenses, for example a feminist perspective, a Marxist perspective and so forth. It requires readers to reflect on contradictory perspectives and to seek out and consider the voices that have been traditionally marginalized.

Focusing on sociopolitical issues means going beyond personal interpretations to understand the political, cultural and historical factors in interpreting literature, studying the relationship between power and language, and using literacy as an entry point to interrogate how systems of power shape perceptions, readers' responses, and daily life. The last dimension, taking action and promoting social justice, involves using the concepts of disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple perspectives, and focusing on critical issues to question practices of privilege and take action to alleviate injustices (Comber, 2001). These dimensions provided a framework for organizing a literature-based unit of study addressing the concept of stereotypes, in particular gender stereotypes, and particular issues of social justice.

Context of the Study

While finishing my dissertation in reading education, I returned to the elementary classroom after three years as a literacy specialist. I was hired to teach a fourth and fifth grade multiage classroom that began the year with twenty-six students. My classroom fairly represented the diversity of the school, consisting of approximately forty-five percent European American students, thirty-five percent Hispanic students, fifteen percent African American students, and five percent Native American students throughout the

year. There was a slight majority of male students during the year, approximately eighteen boys and fourteen girls at one point. At our school, approximately seventy-two percent of its students were provided with free or reduced price lunches.

My classroom would best be described as a child-centered classroom, utilizing a workshop format for reading and writing, and an inquiry-based curriculum for math and sciences (Atwell, 1998; Serafini, 2001). I provided an extensive classroom library, and went to great lengths to purchase and acquire texts that represented the diversity of our school and classroom. It is important to analyze one's classroom library because, "children need to 'see' themselves or their cultural and gender background reflected in a story, quite literally in the words and illustrations" (Creighton, 1997).

During my graduate studies, I became familiar with the theoretical foundations of critical literacy and pedagogy and was interested in addressing some of these concepts in my classroom. As the year progressed, I believed it was important to introduce my students to issues of social justice and democratic principles. The question was how to introduce these concepts without alienating parents and confusing students, while still addressing the somewhat narrowly conceived state curriculum standards that I was under contract to teach.

Pigs in Children's Literature

Stereotypes are prevalent throughout our society and are powerful metaphors affecting the way we think and the actions we take (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). I wanted my students to come to their own understandings of the stereotypes we construct and are exposed to, hoping this may provide an effective point of entry for our unit of study focusing on issues of social justice. In order to introduce the concept of stereotypes, I decided to use contemporary picture books to engage my students in a discussion focusing on the portrayal of "pigs" in contemporary children's literature. Focusing on pigs as characters in picture books would be a comfortable topic, one children were familiar with through their previous reading experiences, and one that I hoped would lead us into other areas of discussion.

Although, the portrayal of pigs in literature seems innocent enough, there are no neutral characterizations in children's literature. All characters in children's literature, whether real or imaginary, portray particular roles and characteristics that reveal the author's vested version of reality (Hanzl, 1993). I introduced the unit of study to my students as a unit focusing on pigs in literature; however, my actual intention was to investigate the concept of stereotypes, using the portrayal of pigs as a point of entry.

I gathered together a series of picture books that contained pigs as the central characters, including: *The Three Little Pigs* (Kellogg, 1997), *The Three Little Pigs* (Marshall, 1989), *Pigs* (Munsch, 1989), *Pigsty* (Teague, 1994), *Hog-Eye* (Meddaugh, 1995), *The Three Little Wolves*

and the Big Bad Pig (Trivizas, 1993), *Piggins* (Yolen, 1987), *Fritz and the Mess Fairy* (Wells, 1991), *Metropolitan Cow* (Egan, 1996), *Piggybook* (Browne, 1986), and *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989). These books contained a portrayal of traditional and non-traditional roles for pigs in children's literature, for example, the traditional roles portrayed in the classic story of the three pigs. By reading one or two books aloud each day, my intention was to disrupt my students' pre-conceived notions of pigs as literary characters, and eventually use this experience to disrupt their pre-conceived notions of stereotypical portrayals of people.

Before we began reading the books, I asked my students to describe the characteristics of pigs, and to tell me what came to their minds when I said the word "pigs." We made a class chart of our ideas during the ensuing discussion. My students responses to the word "pigs" included; sloppy eaters, dirty, not smart, fat, pink, muddy, messy, and slobs. In addition, we made a list of clichés or metaphors that we thought of when we mentioned the word pig(s). This list included: pig sty, some pig, three little pigs, piggy bank, piggies, pigs in a blanket, cool pig, piggie pie, and when pigs fly.

After reading several books, ideas that arose during our discussions were: a) some pigs learned a lesson during the course of particular stories, b) society seems to value neatness over sloppiness, c) you should not judge people by how they look, d) characters change during the course of a story, e) different stories portray pigs in different ways, and f) even if others don't think you are smart, you might actually be smart. We concluded the first section of this unit of study by constructing and discussing the following definitions: (a) stereotypes are a type of thinking that follows a fixed pattern and does not allow for individual differences, (b) norms are a model or standard for behavior, what we tend to see as typical or normal, and (c) roles are socially constructed expectations that people assume and construct during their daily lives. These definitions grew out of our discussions and lead us into the second part of our unit of study that focused on gender roles, norms and stereotypes.

Cinderella: Princess or
Marginalized Domestic Servant?

In order to move the focus of the discussion from fictional, animal characters, like pigs and wolves, to fictional human characters, like Cinderella, and eventually to actual people and events, we began to investigate the character of Cinderella in both traditional, multi-cultural, and fractured or post-modern versions of the tale (Anstey, 2002; Paley, 1992). I wanted our discussions from the pig stories to inform our readings and understandings of the Cinderella tales, especially the concepts of norms, social roles, and stereotypes.

Although the original Brothers Grimm version would be considered the quintessential rendering of the traditional Cinderella tale, we began by recalling and discussing the Disney version of Cinderella in order to provide a foundation for the ensuing discussions because of my students' background and extensive experience with Disney versions of traditional stories. After discussing the plot and events in the Disney version of Cinderella, we created a chart outlining the characteristics of Cinderella. The students described Cinderella as: beautiful, white, blonde hair, thin, tall, sort of wimpy, happy at the end of the story, lucky, in love with Prince Charming, and kind to people and animals. We talked about these characteristics and then talked about other Disney female characters like Snow White, Pocahontas, and the Little Mermaid. We talked about what these characters had in common with Cinderella and how they differed.

Characters in Disney stories, like all other characters, are not real but constructed by authors with particular personalities, experiences, and physical attributes. The characters that have been created in Disney films and versions of traditional tales have been challenged by various researchers and theorists for including stereotypical image of females and female roles in society (Lehr, 2001). Because of these challenges, the Disney version of Cinderella was an important place to begin our interrogation.

As our discussion of Cinderella progressed, students considered how female characters in these various Disney stories were: a) concerned with their looks, rather than their personality, b) preoccupied with finding the right man to marry, c) portrayed as helpless or passive, d) dependent on others, usually men, for their livelihood, e) household servants or relegated to domestic chores, rather than working outside the home, and f) often portrayed as the evil character in many stories, for example, as an evil stepmother, queen or witch. Throughout our discussions it was interesting how both girls and boys remained indifferent to many of the traditional roles assigned to these female characters, in particular Cinderella. Some of my female students expressed a connection to Cinderella, in that, they too, wanted a nice man to marry, wanted to be taken care of, didn't mind doing housework, and worried about their looks every morning before coming to school. Other girls, however, were bothered by these portrayals, and suggested they wanted more freedom to make decisions about their future. Although other educators describing gender stereotypes (e.g. Lehr, 2001) suggested this might occur, I was surprised by the number of girls in my room that weren't bothered by the roles assigned to Cinderella and other female characters, their lack of condemnation about how these women were treated, and by their acceptance of the "naturalness" of these roles.

Particular responses or interpretations of texts by male and female readers can be conceptualized as "gendered readings," where different genders attend to different aspects of the story and characters, and respond in different ways (Cherland, 1992). It is not surprising, given the extensive literature on gender and readers' responses

to literature that my students responded in different ways, generally along gendered differences.

After these discussions, we read alternative versions of the Cinderella tale. We read multicultural versions of Cinderella, for example, *Yeh Shen* (Louie, 1982), *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987), and *Rough-Faced Girl* (Martin, 1992), versions that presented a gender role reversal, for example, *Cinder Edna* (Jackson, 1994), *Cinderhazel* (Lattimore, 1997), *Cinderfella* (Stamper, 1997), *Cinder-Elly* (Minters, 1997), and *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980), or fractured versions of Cinderella, versions that disrupted the setting, characters or themes, for example, *Dinorella* (Edwards, 1997) and *Cinderella Skeleton* (San Souci, 2000).

After discussing the ways in which Cinderella was portrayed in the alternative versions, we read several books where males exhibited what the boys in my room had considered traditional female characteristics and roles, for example, crying, sensitivity to other's feelings, ability to handle domestic chores, and enjoying dancing and cooking (Cherland, 1992). We read *Tough Boris* by Mem Fox (Fox, 1992), where Boris, the tough pirate, cries when his parrot dies. We read *Max* by Rachel Isadora (Isadora, 1976), where Max stops by his sister's ballet class everyday and participates in the dancing before going on to baseball practice. We read *Horace and Morris, But Mostly Dolores* by James Howe (Howe, 2003), a story about three mice, where the female character Dolores didn't want to bake cheese and do what might be considered traditional girl activities, but would rather go on adventures with her male friends. Each of these stories contained an example of role reversal, or non-traditional roles for males and females. The purpose was to disrupt the commonplace assumptions students had about gender roles and begin to discuss how these roles affected our own lives and perspectives.

Constructing Gender Roles and Expectations

The next part of this unit of study focused on making connections between the characters in these stories and our own lives and experiences. To support these connections, I asked my students to look around their homes for images of males and females that they thought were attractive. I explained they could look through magazines, photos, or books to find images of people they found attractive. I asked them to cut out, with permission, any images that fit their criteria, and bring them to class in a few days. I asked each student to bring in two images, minimum, of a male and female they found attractive. As soon as I asked my students to do this, the boys complained that they didn't think about men being attractive or not. However, after a couple of days, every student, boy and girl, was able to bring in at least two pictures, including both men and women.

After students brought in their images of people they found attractive, we displayed them on the classroom wall and discussed any patterns we noticed. We analyzed the contents of the images and created a chart from our discussions. The lists included below are written in my students' own words. In general, the males depicted in the advertisements and images; were popular celebrities, had muscular bodies, had short, brown hair, were mostly Caucasian, wore "baggy" clothes that were in style at the time, showed off their "six-pack abs", had very straight, white teeth, did not wear glasses, were young, and didn't have pimples or blemishes on their faces. In general, the females depicted in the advertisements and images; had flawless skin, had perfect teeth, were mostly Caucasian, were very thin and shapely, had outfits that showed off their breasts, wore perfect make-up, wore dresses or other fancy clothes, were popular celebrities, had blonde or brown hair, and wore bright red lipstick.

I continued our discussions by asking students why the images of attractive people on the wall didn't look like the people in our class or in our families. Was there something wrong with the way we looked if we didn't look like these "beautiful" people? Students talked about how they wanted to look like these people, but probably never would. Aside from my concerns about overemphasizing appearance over personal integrity and self-worth, I was equally concerned that we had been socialized into accepting norms for our appearances that most of us had not, nor would never, attain.

The discussions lasted for several days as we explored ideas about gender roles and society's expectations about how we should dress, wear our hair, and act. We talked about the differences between "ideal" people that were displayed in advertisements and teen magazines, and the "real" people we lived with and were ourselves. The most challenging aspect of these discussions was disrupting the idea that the representations of what was considered attractive contained in the advertisements and magazines created expectations and affected what we considered valuable characteristics. Most of my students wanted to look like these attractive people. I even admitted to my students my desire to have curly, dark hair and six-pack abs again.

The images that we viewed and discussed have great influence over what we consider beautiful or desirable human characteristics. Unfortunately, the advertising industry constructs images of beauty that are not attainable for most people. For example, many girls consider being beautiful as their main objective, preferring beauty over brains and independence (Wason-Ellam, 1997). As classroom teachers, we need to help students deconstruct the messages advertisers, television programs, and teen magazines offer our children to help them develop positive self-images.

Taking Action

The final component in our unit of study was to decide how our discussions and readings would lead to taking action about these issues of gender and social inequalities.

Although the primary purpose of critical pedagogy is to enable students to take informed action against oppression and social inequalities, one cannot do so without the expanded understandings and perspectives gained from disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple perspectives, and focusing on sociopolitical issues (Lewison et al, 2002). We needed an "action plan" for how the concepts we discussed could help us think and act differently.

My students began by revisiting the classroom expectations and bill of rights and responsibilities that we had created earlier in the year. To the list, they added the following ideas:

a. Don't make fun of the way people dress or wear their hair; if this issue arises, the offending student will have to address the class meeting and explain their behavior.
b. Set up opportunities for boys and girls to play games together at lunch and recess
c. Stop dividing the class into lines by gender for going places around the school.
d. Watch for stereotypes in the books we read and set up a "Stereotypes in Books" display center in our library for discussions.
e. Analyze the classroom library for books with stereotypes about male and female roles.

Some of the recommendations that came out of our discussions were somewhat cosmetic, while some had an immediate impact on our classroom discussions and procedures. For example, we created a place for students to display books in our classroom library they thought contained gender stereotypes, and once a week we would revisit their selections and discuss the challenges they presented. In addition, we analyzed our classroom library, not to remove any particular books, rather to ensure strong male and female protagonists were included, and to provide opportunities to discuss trends and issues in the publishing of children's literature. I also agreed to ensure that I read chapter books aloud that alternated between girls and boys as main characters. Students wanted to be sure that the books I selected for our whole class read alouds reflected the diversity of our classroom and school, and contained both strong male and female characters.

In addition, students examined the reading logs they kept during the year, containing a list of all the books they had read, to identify how many books they had read with either male or female protagonists. While some studies have suggested that males are less likely to choose and engage with books that have female protagonists (Segel, 1986), other researchers have pointed out that there has been a shortage in the publication of children's literature that presents strong roles for females, and have called for the inclusion of independent, self-sufficient female protagonists in future publications (Enciso, Rogers,

Marshall, Tyson, & Jenkins, 1999).

My students discovered that their choices in texts followed along the same lines that many researchers described, boys read books with male characters more frequently, and girls read more books with female characters. Whether this is a problem is open for debate, however, what is important is that students, and ourselves as teachers and readers, analyze what we select to read, especially what we select for reading aloud, and ensure that both strong male and female protagonists are included and made available for students.

Implications for Critical Pedagogy

Characters in children's literature are representations of an author's version of reality, and whether intentional or not, they portray particular roles, values, and societal norms. In other words, "the author's views are the author's politics, and the books expressing these views, become purveyors of these politics and potentially persuasive" (Sutherland, 1985). If these images and portrayals remain unchallenged, readers learn to see them as normal, and the normalizing effects of these portrayals defend the status quo.

Like the characters in the traditional tales we read and discussed, our students' gender roles and expectations are constructed through interactions in our schools and society. Schools play a significant role in the socialization of young children, and have enormous influence over how gender is constructed and negotiated (Walkerdine, 1990). Children's literature plays a role in this socialization process, portraying males and females in specific activities and roles in the books children read and are read to them. Children don't have to be passive recipients of these expectations and portrayals, they can be taught to resist and recreate these roles continually, and it is our obligation to help them resist and question those expectations that limit their opportunities. However, exposure to books with strong female characters is not sufficient to disrupt the commonplace assumptions many students and teachers carry with them. As teachers, we have to lead discussions and literary interrogations that trouble traditional notions of gender and make open for discussion those portrayals that are stereotypical and depict females in subservient positions.

Newcomers to critical literacy and pedagogy face numerous challenges to implementing a progressive curricula (Edelsky, 1999a). Some of these challenges include; the absences of a single, widely accepted definition of critical literacy and pedagogical models from which to implement instruction. Beck (2005) states, "because critical literacy has resisted distillation into a single formulaic method, beginning teachers may perceive the lack of method as overwhelming (p. 395). Some teachers might reject a critical pedagogy believing that transmitting knowledge is the purpose of education, helping students to become productive members of our economy. These stated goals, although significant aspects of the public

school mission, are not the only goals to which we should aspire. It is our job to create citizens that question taxes and government, not simply citizens that have the capacity to pay them.

Critical theory and pedagogy should not simply be something that is taught in the spring, but should be a foundation for studies across the disciplines throughout the school year (Simpson, 1996). Until we are able to disrupt the commonplace assumptions about gender, race, social status and ethnicity, are able to attend to these assumptions and representations from multiple perspectives, find ways to bring these issues into elementary and middle school classrooms, and link these social issues to actions that challenge the limitations and loss of agency these assumptions call forth, our pedagogy will continue to uphold dominant ideologies. It is my contention that children's literature that focuses on social issues provides a space for these critical conversations to occur and the opportunity for challenges to be offered to the relationships and institutional systems that perpetuate social inequalities.

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