



IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL LITERACY IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States of America (U.S.A/U.S.) is popularly known to be an economic superpower with the highest GDP (gross domestic product) since decades and is one among the developed countries of the world. The population of the country is multi-cultural, consisting of people from diverse ethnicities. According to the U.S Bureau of Statistics, in Fall 2013 exactly half of the public elementary and secondary schools consisted of White Americans and the other fifty percent of students from more than five different races or ethnicities. Concurrently, the prevalence of social issues related to injustice and discrimination based on colour, ethnicity, gender, class, etc. is argued to have affected the overall well-being of the minority.

There is an urgent need to acknowledge the need of a pedagogy that is relevant to the above mentioned reality. Hence, to understand the role of Critical Literacy (CL) as a pedagogical approach to education in schools, this essay aims to provide a discussion of its relevance for the development of the oppressed. In addition, the growing need of the rightful application of CL has also been stressed.

Firstly, this paper investigates the implications of the current education system on the marginalised. Following this, it illustrates the purpose of CL in a discriminatory social environment caused due to discourse and links it with the role texts play in creating a critical consciousness in relation to self-identity development. Next, the impact of Critical Literacy Pedagogy (CLP) and its inter-connectedness with culturally relevant pedagogy in practice leading to academic success and intellectual growth is evaluated. Finally, it focuses on challenges faced by teachers in classroom application.

BODY

The current educational practices in the U.S. have had numerous unjust implications. In terms of Educational Attainment, the U.S. Bureau of Labour and Statistics reported that thirty percent of Hispanics age twenty-five and older in the U.S. labor force had less than a high school diploma, compared with nine percent of Whites, eight percent of Blacks, and seven percent of Asians in 2012. Additionally, compared to their white counterparts, black males with low levels of education are considered to be more likely to be in prison (Pettit and Western, 2004) and die at young ages (Rogers, Hummer and Nam, 2000). Congruently, Black or African American workers with at least a bachelor's degree had median weekly

earnings of \$970 in 2014, compared with \$1,219 for White workers with the same level of education (U.S. Bureau of Labour and Statistics, 2012).

Equal employment affected by discriminatory practices in the U.S. still remains a serious problem, irrespective of changes to policies that emphasize equal access to education and employment (Phelps et al., 1972, as cited in Everett et al., 2011). Educational disparities that currently exist and its effects are expected to amplify due to decreased government spending on education (*Kane, Orszag and Gunter 2003*, as cited in Everett et al., 2011). For example, the No Child Left Behind Act was originally designed to increase accountability in schools (Everett et al., 2004). However, government funding being the major source of income for Public schools, factors such as low grades or test scores negatively influence the flow of money. Hence, schools push out students who fall in this category instead of equipping the disadvantaged populations with incentives that improve their current state (Orfield et.al., as cited in Everett et al., 2004).

Ladson-Billings (2006, as cited in Welton & Williams, 2015) and Milner (2012, as cited in Welton & Williams, 2015) suggest that the complex realities of high “minority” schools are not taken into account when implementing standardised one-size-fits-all testing systems and superficial performance parameters. As a result, communities that have already experienced marginalization throughout history from a number of institutional structures related to housing, education, economic, social services are at a higher risk of falling apart as the schools present in these districts lack basic resources and the student population consists of students with greater academic, social and emotional needs (Gay, 2007; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005, as cited in Welton & Williams, 2015).

Based on the aforementioned reality, it can be understood that the discourse created throughout history has led to the creation of power relations in the society. This has further led to oppression of individuals who do not fit into the socially structured standard set text. The Hispanics and African Americans are demotivated to get educated because irrespective of their qualifications, societal prejudices restrict them from moving forward and be treated equally. Therefore, "critical literacy", that mainly uses technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, such rule systems and practices governing the social fields of everyday life (Luke, 2004, as cited in Cho, 2015) can help tackle the intolerant practices.

Contemporary research on CLP identifies an interesting viewpoint on the process of developing a critical consciousness leading to self-identity creation. This mainly involves interpretation of Language or 'text'. Friere and Macedo (1987, as cited in Lopez, 2011) suggest that CL should engage students in developing a critical consciousness that interrogates the discursive structures they build their understanding of the world upon. Hence, instead of viewing students like empty vessels to be filled with information, it is vital to teach them to process, interpret and have an opinion about this information- 'actively construct knowledge'.

Language results in meaning-making and is deeply bound with producing, reproducing and maintaining unequal arrangements of power (Moumou, 2004). These could not necessarily be innocent. Also, as Janks (1992, as cited in Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012) suggests, they are merely descriptive, performative, factual or propositional. Hence, an implied reader, going through an interpellation process is consciously or unconsciously subjected by the text's preferred meaning, if accepted by him/her (Althusser, 1970, as cited in Moumou, 2004). It is noteworthy that this may occur through a range of other social practices such as the ever-present popular culture outside students' classrooms that has a more personal impact accompanied by broad social implications on them. In this light, as suggested by Moumou (2004), changes in students' way of thinking due to the exposure to language in the form of texts is neglected by education systems.

In relation to the interest of recognizing contingent relationships with texts and language, reference to the body would be apt. It is a text produced by socially circulating norms for gender, race, sexuality, class, age and ability (Kalmer, 1997, as cited in Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012), a site where these complicated relationships play out across the lifespan. Through daily, bodily repetitions, (i.e., speech, gesture and dress), we reproduce and re-inscribe these meanings (Bettie, 2003; Butler, 1999; Youdell, 2006, as cited in Johnson and Vasudevan, 2012). For example, a woman with long hair is believed by many to be symbolic of femininity. However, the same woman in a crew cut is immediately considered to be rather masculine. This leads us to conceptualise CL as performed (Blackburn, 2003, as cited in Johnson and Vasudevan, 2012), positioned (Bomer and Laman, 2004, as cited in Johnson and Vasudevan, 2012), and produced (Youdell, 2006, as cited in Johnson and Vasudevan, 2012). What counts as CL might be speaking, dressing, or gesturing to express a particular way of being that belies, subverts, and exposes social norms and power imbalances. Such performances are critical because they allow youth to explore and expose

ways power circulates. Hence, it can be inferred that CL can be expressed through physical embodiment, which results in self-identity creation.

Examples of expression of CL based on a study conducted by Johnson and Vasudevan in a high school is showcased in two vignettes mentioned in the paper. One involved a student's understanding of her own identity, terming herself as a wise spender for her choice of lip gloss irrespective of other's actions of going for the new trend based on the latest popular song. Her critical-literate self recognised the lack of difference between both. Congruently, the second instance with Santo (a Dominican-Ecuadorian boy) and Jessica (a Chinese-American girl) includes their self-expression of being critically literate by means of discussing evidently prevalent issues such as racism through humor presented on media. This evidence focuses attention on critiquing and transforming the norms based on rule systems and practices, i.e. discourse governing the social fields of everyday life.

The current debate about the irrelevance of CL for academic development of students can be identified as not well grounded. Many researchers observing the impact of CL and teachers implementing CLP in their classrooms have in fact claimed that the resulting behavioral improvement in the students indirectly leads to academic success and intellectual growth. Once students comprehend the interplay of power relations in the society, they learn to tackle them.

Associated with power relations, schools have been racially integrated only since fifty years in the United States (Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011). Consequently, even though the schools comprise of students from diverse backgrounds, mostly White Americans from economically superior backgrounds perform better at academics (Goodwin, 2002; Sleeter, 2001, as cited in Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011). In addition, National Center for Education Statistics reported that 81.9% of public elementary and secondary school teachers consist of White Americans (NCES, 2012). Therefore, having never experienced racial injustice, ironically, the power of changing what counts as desirable or successful and embracing teaching for social justice in schools today is in the hands of teachers who often succeed in status quo pedagogies and have positive memories of their own schooling (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006; Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008, as cited in Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011). Carter and Goodwin (2004, as cited in Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011) documented the low expectations of many White teachers towards children of colour- framing them as biologically and culturally inferior in their studies. Hence, an inference that white privilege along with discrimination based on colour results in

diminishing the learning capabilities and potential of students with certain ethnic origins can be made.

To further understand the role of CLP for the development of the oppressed, this section illustrates the identification of CLP with social justice education. Based on a study held in an urban middle school with more than fifty percent of them classified as economically disadvantaged (Ohio State Department of Education, 2007, as cited in Price- Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011), Friere's (1970, as cited in Lopez, 2011) problem-posing methodology was considered as a practical approach towards practices promoting indiscrimination and equality in my understanding. In this model, classrooms became spaces where students interrogated social conditions through dialogue about issues significant to their own lives.

The research project involved a pre-service teacher named Jill, who incorporated her students' interests and inquiries into lesson plans, drawing from their cultural knowledge and lived experiences from home and school communities. By fusing these two worlds together, she was better able to help students understand the systemic nature of oppression and discrimination as well as how it is operated in a variety of places in their lives (Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011). In practice, she made them read and interpret music CD covers of hip-hop artists, have discussions on the underlying meaning of the pictures and prepare a music CD cover collage depicting their own lives. With regard to learning, Jill considered it a social practice as her pedagogical choices encompassed class discussions, sharing ideas and working in small groups. Not only did she ensure that everyone is respectful of ideas or opinions shared by their classmates but she also de-centered her voice as a dominant source of knowledge, providing an opportunity for the students to illustrate their personal interpretation of the curriculum (Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011). The strength of this approach is to ensure students read texts in and outside classrooms beyond its face value, a major component of CLP.

Building on from the idea that CL is socially relevant, this section explores the idea that culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is necessary for the American educational context, wherein the effects of immigration and globalisation on students' identities are deeming them to be transnational, fluid and emerging (Au, 2009, as cited in Lopez, 2011). Given this social reality, it is imperative that teachers engage in teaching approaches that are effective in educating today's diverse student population. CL and CRP go hand in hand. In fact, in my opinion CRP acts as a catalyst to CLP and they complement each other. CL provides a gateway for teachers who are seeking to develop culturally relevant and socially just

pedagogies (Fisher 2005, as cited in Lopez, 2011). Additionally, Irvine & Armento (2001, as cited in Lopez 2011) and Villegas & Lucas (2002, as cited in Lopez, 2011) claim that CRP's way of focusing on students' diverse experiences and backgrounds to increase their academic achievement and draw their attention to engage in classrooms is effective. While CRP is a "pedagogy of opposition, committed to collective but not individual empowerment", CL in much the same way encourages the deconstructing of power, values and attitudes in texts. For the target social groups in this essay, this process is a form of empowerment (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1992, as cited in Lopez, 2011). As a result, managing heterogeneous and multicultural classrooms should ideally be built on an understanding that cultures represented in the classrooms must carefully be understood by the teachers, as well as acknowledge that learning may differ across cultures. These two combined aspects need to be further translated into instructional practice (Villegas, 1991, as cited in Lopez, 2011).

The above mentioned claim is evidenced in this study-based research of a large, sub-urban, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-faith secondary school, where growing cross-racial tensions were witnessed by an African-Canadian teacher (Meriah) in her class and the school at large. Based on observations, students of colour tend to be disciplined more often than white students for minor infractions (Noguera, 2008, as cited in Lopez, 2011). He also suggested that biased and stereotypical views fuel some teachers' approach to discipline and students of colour. These power relations based on the Discourse surrounding the societal norms hinders the intellectual development of students. Thus, Meriah's culturally relevant teaching strategies were based on students' success, inclusion and utilising unique qualities of every single one of them.

One such activity mentioned involved writing in response to some well-known American and Canadian poets' works a poem about their personal inhibitions and share with the rest of the class. Performance poetry was inculcated as a tool to engage them in critical discussions after listening to others' while examining the conventions of different poetic forms. Her technique enabled students to deconstruct the position of the author, critique the socio-cultural and socio-political contexts, tease out areas of cultural tensions among peers and finally, use action-based praxis to express followed by reflecting on the social realities. The evidence highlights that CLP methods were able to make the students aware and become accepting of others' diverse characteristics, a much needed requirement for a society to live by an equity based value system, that otherwise results in the oppression of the minority.

This final section provides a general discussion of the challenges faced by teachers in the application of CL. Literature suggests that CL aims to create justice-oriented citizens in order to tackle the discourse of a larger discourse called Education for a democratic economy (Stribling, 2014). However, I believe that the increasing emphasis of a teachers' effectiveness measured based on the test scores of standardised tests of their students takes away their power of making context-specific decisions about relevant pedagogical practices. Based on an article by a TESOL (Teach English as a Second or Other Language) teacher-educator, resistance and skepticism were behaviors displayed by her student-teachers practicing in Hawaii and Kansas. Expression of their discomfort and disagreement with the state driven standardised procedures indicated their inclination. Nevertheless, bound with the possibility of losing their jobs, their willingness for improvement resulted in them feeling helpless according to the author. Hence, it can be established that the relationship with policymakers hinders the application process of CL up to a great extent.

In relation, application of CLP in classrooms is claimed to receive unsupportive responses from the community for questioning values believed at home. Student-teachers from the same study exhibited concern about the potential responses from parents in enacting CL in the classroom. A teacher's comments included, "We, as teachers many times avoid certain topics: topics that many students desire to learn about. Personally, I as a teacher "play it safe" and avoid some topics that could potentially get me in trouble with students' parents" (Cho, 2015). Such statements restrict teachers' willingness to create an effective socially relevant learning environment for students, as a result, they are rendered woefully helpless for practicing CL in classrooms.

The significance of CL has been confirmed by many. However, it's correct understanding and application has become more crucial, that otherwise drifts away from its importance. There is a collective emphasis on the correct, vast and unbounded application of CL pedagogies in student and teacher education. Observations from a study conducted by Lee (2011) demonstrate ramifications stemming from misconception, misinterpretation and unawareness. It concluded that a myth exists surrounding the suitability of CL restricted only towards higher ability students as CLP involves critical, divergent and lateral thinking. Furthermore, CL practice in a middle school classroom was scripted and students' thinking was confined to follow the appropriately designed structure set by the teacher in a study organized by Jessica, Zacher and Pandya (2011). CLP is not an instructional strategy.

According to Friere's beliefs, CL is to critically read both the word and the world (Friere and Macedo, 1987, as cited in Lee, 2011) and empower human beings to be able agents to

progress humanity, which is constantly thwarted by injustice, exploration, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors (Friere, 1984, as cited in Lee, 2011). Likewise, Michael Crotty (2003, as cited in Lee, 2011) says that Freire's pedagogy "is no mere pedagogical technique. It intimately reflects Freire's philosophy of existence. In this sense, CL is an education related philosophical belief supporting values that revolve around students' relationship with language or texts – "as language users, not language recipients". It is through these understandings can they co-construct their world with others (Sluys, 2005, as cited in Lee, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Clearly, this essay has shown that the main factors which impact upon the progress and advancement of the negligible portion of the population of the U.S. are embedded in CLP. Developing a critical consciousness ensures that one is not subjected by every-day texts that encourage him/her to follow power relations caused due to discourse in the world at large. Furthermore, dialogic interpretation disrupts and acknowledges tensions. Particularly, it is important to take into consideration the diversity of the students' backgrounds and employ effective teaching methods for academic excellence.

The evidence presented in this assignment has shown that teachers are responsible for the oppression of their students as much as the society is. Hence, it is imperative that teachers play an active role in the implementation of this pedagogy and CL as part of teacher education curriculum is instilled. It is assumed by many to be more difficult in practice, nonetheless, it's application is of paramount importance in a multi-cultural setting that is built on inequality. Social justice and equity are after all pillars of an egalitarian society.

To conclude, this assignment has addressed a number of significant issues which show that social injustice and indiscriminate based on ethnic backgrounds can be tackled through the implementation of CLP in schools. Consequently, CL espouses the belief that it is through education that social justice can be promoted. It is mainly executed by questioning how language and literacy are influenced by and influence social relations and power around them (Cho, 2015).