


## Chapter 4

# Early Years Critical Literacies and Rights: A Review

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### ABSTRACT

*Critical literacies as a field carries immense potential to provide students tools to build a better, more caring, and just world. This is especially true for students at the earliest years of education as they create the foundations for active citizenship in society. When these tools are connected to discourses that focus on equal treatment of all humans anywhere in the world, there is hope that future generations will actively resist long-standing systems of mistreatment. This literature review seeks to bring together two bodies of work and ponder at how they might work in relation to one another. This literature is then analyzed in relation to the physical location in which they take place to open understandings of how geopolitics, history, and culture impact what can and should be done. Critical literacies and discourses around human rights create complex intersections that share more in common than what might appear at surface level. Educators and educational policies should work to better understand these intersections to support the holistic development of any student.*

### INTRODUCTION

For anyone who has spent time with and listened to students in early years education settings it should be obvious that their ideas are almost always connected to broader issues in society. Yet oftentimes the structures embedded within educational systems do not provide supportive space for students and teachers to truly explore these ideas. On one hand there have been monumental and creative shifts by early years educators and how they approach challenging issues to support students' engagement with perspectives from around the globe. At the same time, there are continued efforts to implement top-down notions of "school-readiness" that take away from these critical thinking spaces (Bentley & Souto-Manning,

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2019). Early years educators continue to find unique ways of incorporating issues that impact children worldwide and support them in developing critical tools for deep exploration in the classroom.

Without finding ways to continually support this essential work, young students will not have the skills, tools, or resources to actively reflect and act upon future injustices around the globe. Additionally, they will be at risk of inheriting siloed understandings of complex topics related to their own lived realities. Students should be given the opportunity to act in the best interests of their personal well-being. Doing so requires strong foundations built in the earliest years of education.

This paper seeks to expand upon the intersection of research within critical literacies in early years education and ideas centered around the rights of being human. In reviewing the relevant literature, this paper attempts to take a step back and view where such work has been or currently is taking place in hopes of showing where future efforts may be welcome and/or needed. The literature reviewed is then organized geographically, allowing for an analysis of themes based on historical, political, and cultural differences. Doing so, will generate questions around why specific educational efforts take place in relation to unique configurations of space and time dependent on location.

This review does not seek to provide a complete picture on all that has taken place within these bodies of literature but attempts to highlight a few examples of how it has been done. This organization and interpretation will inform future research that seeks to understand the complex nature of engaging in critical literacy practices that are connected to concepts around the rights of being human. The examples presented showcase how educators, researchers and students can work together to engage in educational practices that build foundations for active citizenship in the world while also seeking to challenge those who limit these abilities for others.

One aspect to keep in mind in the generation of this literature review is that the search process was conducted in English, through United States based infrastructure. This undoubtedly has an impact on the material one is exposed to and can draw upon. As this work moves forward it is important to remain vigilant on such limitations and work to support and uplift various and under-represented perspectives. Due to the nature of this work, finding ways to apply insights into classroom settings and talking about it in a conventional academic manner are two very different elements and should be seen as useful in their own capacity while also being able to support one another.

## **BACKGROUND**

Critical literacies and direct links to discourses around rights within early years education are concepts that have many similarities, but often remain separate within the research literature or at least not explicitly connected. This section expands upon these two concepts and attempts to put them in conversation with one another. In doing so, this review hopes to create a line of thinking that generates new inquiry for what could be as our world engages with continual transformations within educational pedagogy and research while confronting the complex realities faced by humans everyday across the world.

### **Critical Literacies**

Critical literacy in general is a broad term with various contextualized meanings. For the purposes of this review, Hilary Janks' definition from the 2013 article, "Critical Literacy in Teaching and Research" is used as a starting point:

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