


Chapter 4

Formative Assessment in a Teacher Education Course: Supporting Teachers to Teach Critical Literacy to Young Children

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ABSTRACT

Although many teachers are sympathetic to critical literacy's social justice agenda, they are often unsure about how to implement it in their classrooms. This is particularly so in contexts where increased accountability requires standardized forms of assessment. The challenge for teacher educators is to find ways to support student teachers and teachers who are new to critical literacy. The chapter focuses on how postgraduate students new to critical literacy learn to use this approach with young children. The chapter explicates the ways in which formative assessment is practiced as part of a critical pedagogy to support students' understandings of critical literacy, it describes how low-risk opportunities to put critical literacy into practice are provided, furthermore it considers the ways in which dialogue works to support inexperienced critical literacy teachers and finally examines the benefits of formative assessment practices within a critical pedagogy from a teacher educator perspective.

INTRODUCTION

I have done Critical Literacy as an undergrad course before but, to be perfectly honest, I never thought much of it and definitely did not plan to ever use it when I started teaching. (Alison, postgraduate student)

Alison's comment about not seeing the value of critical literacy is indicative of the view held by many of the students I teach. The problem is, as Alison's reflection reveals, that even if students have encountered critical literacy in their undergraduate degree, they cannot see the value of using critical literacy in their

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classrooms. This is partly because there is a pernicious misconception that critical literacy is not an appropriate approach to use in early years and elementary classrooms (Comber, 2012) and, as is the case at my university, it is not incorporated into the early literacy courses students take in their undergraduate degree. If students do encounter critical literacy in their degree, then the focus is on content and students' ability to read texts critically, rather than on pedagogical applications in the classroom. Although many student teachers and practicing teachers are sympathetic to critical literacy's social justice agenda, they are often unsure about how to implement it in their classrooms (Dixon and Janks, 2019), particularly in contexts of increased accountability that require standardized forms of assessment (Morgan & Wyatt-Smith, 2000; Zacher Pandya, 2014).

The challenge then is for teacher educators to find ways to support student teachers and teachers who are new to critical literacy so that they can introduce a critical literacy approach into their classrooms. As an approach to education, critical literacy's aim is to produce agentive citizens who can effect change for the better. It requires that teachers and children ask critical questions together. But learning to ask such questions that make oppressive social structures visible is challenging (Dixon and Janks, 2019). From a teacher educator perspective this requires an understanding of the theoretical and practical resources student teachers and teachers need, because merely having knowledge about what critical literacy is and a social justice disposition, is insufficient. How teacher educators may begin to support students to do this in classrooms with young children is what this chapter takes up.

This chapter sets out to describe the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment decisions that were made in the design and implementation of a post-graduate course in Early Literacy I teach to support students' teaching of critical literacy to young children. The course forms part of an Honors degree, which is a one-year postgraduate degree students complete before they can register for a Master's degree in South Africa. While some of the students complete the degree as full-time students, the majority are full-time teachers doing the degree part-time. Black and Wiliam's (2018) concern that there is a lack of articulation between pedagogy and assessment in the literature on pedagogy is taken up in this chapter. Assessment, for them, is a necessary component in a theory of pedagogy. The chapter aims to 1) explicate and trace the ways in which formative assessment is used in this course as part of a critical pedagogy to support students' understandings of critical literacy; 2) describe how low-risk opportunities to put critical literacy into practice are provided for students to enable them to use critical literacy in the classroom; 3) consider the ways in which dialogic interactions can work to support inexperienced critical literacy teachers and, 4) because sound formative assessment practices provide insights into learning not just for students but also teachers, to examine the benefits of taking seriously the interrelationship between formative assessment and critical pedagogy from a teacher educator's perspective.

In order to do this, the chapter is structured into four parts. It begins by presenting scholarship on critical literacy and argues for its relevance in the South African context. It then sketches some of the key elements from the literature on formative assessment and brings this together with work on critical pedagogy to illustrate how the synergies between formative assessment and critical pedagogy can be used to support students' learning. Lastly, the chapter focuses on the Early Literacy course itself and assessment practices in the form of written and oral dialogic interactions to show the ways in which particular forms of learning took place for the students and me.

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