

Chapter 4

Creating the Citizen: Critical Literacy, Civics, and the C3 Framework in Social Studies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an approach to civic education that integrates critical literacy with the research-based promising practices of civic education and the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards. The authors present a definition of critical literacy that reflects a broad-based approach to the concept while exploring what critical literacy may look like within a civic education classroom and the ways in which this reflects a particular approach to good citizenship. Perceived connections between critical literacy, the promising practices, and the dimensions of the C3 Framework are illustrated throughout the chapter, and the authors provide a real-world example to demonstrate what integration may look like in practice through either extra-curricular or classroom-based student engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Civic education, if one believes the media, is ‘in crisis.’ Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment are stagnant or decreasing. The achievement gap between white and minority students remains significant. The degree to which citizen civic engagement is happening is questionable. Civic learning itself is poorly defined. In some cases, it is simply not occurring, often as a result of continued pressure on instructional time in the social studies (Bok, 2017; Dillon, 2011; Gonch & Poliakoff, 2016; Rogers, 2012). Less than 25 percent of Americans engage in dialogue with their local elected officials, work together to solve a community problem, join community groups, or volunteer in their communities (Lou Frey Institute, 2018).

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The purpose of this chapter is not to question the prevailing narrative concerning civic education. The numbers, after all, do not lie. Rather, we seek to move beyond the narrative of crisis and towards a narrative of possibility. Within this chapter, we explore the connection between critical literacy and civics, and how this connection might translate into classroom instruction and community action through the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework of the National Council for the Social Studies (2013). Drawing on current practices and approaches in Florida and elsewhere, we consider the question: What might critical literacy look like within the civics classroom? Our examples will seek to provide ways in which this can impact the broader academic environment and a more personal neighborhood-focused pursuit of change.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER: CRITICAL LITERACY AND CIVICS

Defining Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is not a new idea, nor does it have a uniform definition, but it is increasingly relevant in the current political, social, and educational environment. Put simply, critical literacy is about power – that is, helping students in their understanding of where power comes from, who holds it, how it affects us, and how we might be able to impact the power relationships that shape our discourse (Behrman, 2006; Elmborg, 2006; Janks, 2000; Shor, 1999; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wolk, 2003). It is, in the words of Shor (1999), about “...questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane” (p. 1). Critical literacy requires us to allow students the freedom of interpreting their own lives, making decisions based on both their understanding of the knowledge at hand and their lived experiences, understanding multiple viewpoints, and having a voice that can be both heard and potentially impactful (Behrman, 2006; Delpit, 1988; Gee, 2002; Giroux, 1988; Lewison, Seely Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Accordingly, we consider each of these elements of critical literacy, as they will help shape our approach to what each might look like within a civic education framework.

Interpreting Their Own Lives

Critical literacy encourages students to consider the world around them and the ways in which their lives are shaped by both hidden and overt power dynamics across race, class, gender, sexuality, and other characteristics of “difference” (Behrman, 2006; Elmborg, 2006; Giroux, 1988; Janks, 2000; Lewison, Seely Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Shor, 1999; Soares & Wood, 2010; Wolk, 2003). To be clear, critical literacy within this context is about developing understanding, not assigning blame. In order to seek solutions for the issues that impact their lives, they must first understand the roots of those issues. This conception of interpreting their own lives can provide students a voice, as it becomes not only their own responsibility, but their right, to know, understand, and share their own stories. We will elaborate on the concept of student voice more later in this chapter.

Making Decisions

The development of decision making skills is not a new concept within education, especially in the social studies. One need only look back to the work of John Dewey (1938) to consider how students can

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