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Agents of Change - Using Critical Literacy to Promote Social Action

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### *My Personal Journey Towards Social Action Teaching*

I have always searched for answers, for knowledge. By nature, I am a curious person. As multiple quests for truth in my teaching and learning endeavors came to abrupt halts when I was confronted with more questions than answers, I knew there had to be something more to me, to my life, to my career as a teacher than trying to find the “right way, the correct answer.” See, the problem with looking for answers is that we look to a person thought to be the guardian of all knowledge and we want them to spoon feed us “what to do” so that we can just do it and get it over with. It becomes a thoughtless, voiceless, meaningless experience. Often we don’t think that there can be multiple ways of looking at the question and we don’t realize that the “answer” is dependent upon the perspective of its author. My new quest is for wisdom and comfort in the endless journey of questions or curiosities.

One of the biggest questions I had growing up was “what is the purpose of studying history?” If it’s in the past and if I can’t take action to make a difference, then what difference does it make to me? I needed a purpose for reading, for writing, for learning and my purpose had to be linked to a meaningful action. Because of my need to take purposeful action in my life and world, history was not my favorite subject in school because it seemed so one-dimensional and useless; it was a closed book. I could memorize names and dates and even write convincing essays in regard to historical events. However, I was always distanced from history and not as motivated to learn it’s content because I could not make a personal connection to it. My social studies education in elementary school, middle school, and even to some degree in high school was one of citizenship transmission in which teachers directly transmitted what someone had deemed to be ideal values to the me (as a student) to create “loyal believers” in a particular set of

truths. I made my ship replica to “celebrate” Columbus Day and I faithfully wrote my “I Have A Dream” speech each year in honor of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday (the one time each year we discussed this monumental historical figure). However, facts, dates, and people were transmitted to me in meaningless ways, disconnecting the lessons of historical events from my potential actions in the future.

After choosing a career in education, I was concerned about how I could be an effective Social Studies teacher if I was not interested in the topic myself. During my undergraduate education, my whole view of Social Studies education changed for good and for the better. I was introduced to the idea that social studies education should explore an area of the human mind that the current transmission style couldn’t reach, probing deeper than the recall of facts to contact the very essence of my character. The theory used was a critical literacy approach to promote social action. When presented with this format of instruction, I was instantly engaged. I was presented with problems such as “Should we celebrate Columbus as a hero?” and “What do his exploration accomplishments look like from the perspective of the American Indians?” Using these problems as springboards for reflection, I was able to explore all sides of issues and then make decisions about what I thought was the valuable lesson in each historical event. When studying social studies before my undergraduate degree, I would have stopped after learning the necessary facts and dates for the test and then think, “This is history which happened a long time ago, what can I do about it now?” When engaged in critical literacy, I realized that it was the personal connection to my own life facilitated by perspective taking that was the essential piece of social studies education that was missing from my early experiences. The answer to my question was that I needed to develop different perspectives, empathy, and connections to those humans involved in such historical events and then extract from those connections a need to take

action in my own life and future to do my part to prevent tragic history from repeating itself. So my next question, as a potential educator, was, “how do I help my students make these meaningful connections to their own lives?”

It was at this point in my educational experience, while pondering this question, that I had a educator in my undergraduate Social Studies education course who helped her elementary students look at a historical event from a critical standpoint and then take a social stand in their own world. This educator had taught the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City to her first grade students as an opportunity to teach ways in which they could prevent a tragedy like this from happening again by making choices to be understanding, accepting of others, and non-violent in their actions. As a community building experience, her class ran the OKC Memorial Kids’ Marathon together in order to show their belief in making positive life decisions so that they would not hurt others. Being a native Oklahoman and having been a middle school student when the bombing happened, I found the educational opportunity provided by this teacher to be something that I would like to model my citizenship education approach after because it was meaningful and empowering.

Piggybacking off of the ideas of my this educator, in my first year of teaching I created a curriculum for a unit teaching the National Week of Hope (week commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Oklahoma City Bombing) to my second graders, while still teaching the concepts in the Oklahoma PASS standards. The overriding and culminating event in this unit was inviting my class and other school members to participate in the OKC Memorial Kids’ Marathon. It was during this experience that I realized that literature provides a rich tool through which students can identify and empathize with people involved in historical events and make connections to their own lives. This unit was deeply meaningful to myself, as well as to my

students. From this experience, my students came realize that they were empowered with the ability to make their own decisions about their actions, whether positive or negative, for themselves and others. Along with this came the connection that when they were running the OKC Memorial Kids' Marathon, they were running to make the statement that they wanted to prevent tragic events from happening again; they were wanting to be part of the solution, not the problem. We took an event in history and made it a purposeful means through which to take action. After having a bombing survivor speak to my class, one of my students followed her new hero out of the room and told her that she now knew why she was running, "so this will never happen again to a person like you." What a meaningful, connection made that will remain with that student her whole life and hopefully influence her future choices.

The power of this unit influenced my principal to want to make this a school-wide curriculum focus the next year. It was my charge to put the pieces of this unit together in a way that, to differing degrees based on each teacher's participation level, engaged each child in this type of critical literacy through history, literature, and discussion. In my second year of bringing this event to my school, I took a larger role in the marathon by becoming the Co-Chair for the Oklahoma City Memorial Kids' Marathon.

My personal goal, in summary, is to take a historical event (such as the Oklahoma City Bombing) and create a model for teaching it through critical literacy. When experiencing the history and literature in combination with critical literacy and perspective taking, students will develop empathy for the people involved in the historical event while making meaningful connections to their own life by taking action in their present and future. The aim is that these actions have positive outcomes for themselves and society. By participating in this National Week of Hope unit and the OKC Memorial Kids' Marathon, students will begin to question the

actions they take in their own lives through reflection, as well as to be able to engage in decision-making and meaningful participation in a school/community activity.

### **What is Critical Literacy (and what is it not)**

As a teacher striving to promote literacy development in children, one must look at literacy development not as a linear process that follows a straight and narrow line, but as more of a spherical object with various layers building upon each other to create a well-rounded literate individual. When a literacy event occurs, they cut right through each dimension of that child's literate world, involving each aspect of literacy interacting to construct meaning. Although there is value and importance to each dimension of literacy, the focus of this project lies in the examination of an aspect of the sociocultural dimension of literacy (Kucer, 2005). Literacy is socially constructed, therefore not neutral by nature. An act of literacy is a patterned social act of a group (Kucer, 2005). Students come to school with their own narrative created from their own life experiences, and these life experiences tend to be heavily influenced by their social and cultural experiences. Just like children's views are socially influenced and not neutral, the actual teaching of literacy always embraces a particular ideology or perspective, therefore not neutral (Powell, Cantrell & Adams, 2001) . When all of these unique life narratives come together in a school, they are often molded and shaped by the practices considered to be the norm. The norm tends to be creating literate citizens able to compete in the labor market to maintain social order in our society (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002). This form of functional literacy discourages students from critically examining ideas and texts relative to their own individual and social constructions of meaning. Cultural knowledge held by students becomes redesigned to match what society considers to be the essential knowledge (Powell, Cantrell & Adams, 2001). The emphasis here is not reading to learn, but merely learning to read (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002).

This is not meant to say that learning to read in the linguistic or cognitive dimensions is not important, it's just not the whole picture (when considered alone) that encompasses each child as a unique work of art painted with different colors and mediums.

Another norm in school literacy construction is cultural literacy in which literacy acts function to expose learners to what all Americans need to know to exist in society (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002). A weakness of this approach is that a common background is needed to understand literacy in this manner, and not all children have the shared knowledge to participate. Students sometimes learn that in order to be successful in school, they need to try to align their own construction of literacy with that of the school and it doesn't always work. This misalignment causes students to be labeled as having deficiencies in literacy, which tends to equate to deficiencies in human character (Kucer, 2005). Critical literacy is an approach to literacy that busts through the brick wall sheltering the school's ideal conception of normal and extends itself to include the diverse backgrounds students bring into the classroom; it is NOT aligned with the dominant practice. In doing this, students can recognize existing social barriers and step over the borders that separate people (Ciardiello, 2004). A critical examination of a text or an idea helps the student see that language is altered by the unequal distributions of power and that social conditions determine how we talk about history and our society (Bean & Moni, 2003). Critical literacy allows students to create knowledge instead of simply finding knowledge. The focus of critical literacy is a progressive one in which person voice and historical context empower students to find their place in the world (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002).

Literacy is socially constructed. It is written, read, and interpreted from the viewpoint of the author's and the reader's personal belief systems that embed different perspectives and voices in the text. Therefore students need to learn to attend to different perspectives and voices

in literature in order to read critically. This critical reading developed from weighing and considering perspectives affects the way children interact with text. One example of how embedded perspectives affect the reader's interaction with the text is reader positioning. Authors intend an ideal position for their readers and it's up to the reader to accept or reject the position offered (Bean & Moni, 2003). Perspective taking cannot be developed if the reader does not recognize that they are supposed to take a certain position in relation to the text. Through perspective taking and critical literacy, students realize the stance the author has taken and the stance they expect the reader to take and the reader can accept or reject the intended position at that point. Participating in critical literacy asks the students to be text critics, taking the "official" version of the "the truth" and listening for both the spoken and suppressed voices in the text; both the explicit and the subtle stories (Kucer, 2005). When considering different perspectives and voices, students read a text to weigh and to consider, assessing the value of what is read (Sadoski, 2004). Becoming critically literate is a process; one that represents a changing relationship between the self and the societal world through this consideration of perspective and positioning (Rogers, 2002).

Critical literacy invites the reader to experience history as a story told from one perspective that needs to be told from many other perspectives (Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002). Critical literacy asks who is silenced and to whom do we give voice? Textual devices, such as vocabulary and syntax, help the reader detect the assertion of one voice at the expense of omission of another. When looking at a text's wording, a critical reader notices the use of words such as *we*, *us*, *they* that construct concepts of who is like us and who belongs to the group of others (Luke, 2000). Syntax alerts the reader to who is speaking with an active voice and who is speaking with a passive voice, giving clues as to who is valued as the member of the dominant,

respected culture (Luke, 2000). Through critical literacy, students examine issues of power and perspective and develop empathy for those to whom they can relate or toward those whose voices need to be heard. Developing empathy can lead students to want to do something to help. Changing society for the better is a mutual aim shared by students engaging in critical literacy. In order to establish mutual aims, we just talk to one another, truly listen to the perspectives of others, and value other's opinions no matter how different they are from ours (Powell, Cantrell & Adams, 2001).

When exploring history and literature from multiple perspectives, a student is often confronted with the task of finding his/her own identity, voice, and perspective in the literacy event. Striving to make personal connections to the text or event can lead to a disconnect if the student's personal position differs from the intended position set forth by the author. Whether a student agrees or disagrees with the perspective presented, the attempted alignment most likely led them to an identification of their own beliefs. Critical literacy is a form of a response in which the reader contemplates the ideas and feelings evoked by the text and then explores the question *what does this mean for me?* (Sadoski, 2004). While searching for an answer to this question, students may come into contact with ideas that disrupt their individually constructed worldview (Flint, 2000). This discomfort with perspectives that are different and difficult to swallow allows students to live through a text by personalizing challenging new ideas and finding a place for them in their life's narrative (Sadoski, 2004). Students' life narratives, written by both individual meaning construction and social influence, are altered when these critical readers find their own authentic voice and regain their own personal identity (a goal of critical literacy).

Along with a critical examination of text, discourse plays a vital role in helping students find their own voices, while listening to the voices of others. Discourse, as defined by James Gee is “connected stretches of language which hang together so as to make sense to some community of people” (Gee as cited in Kucer, 2005, 21). Discourse can also be thought of as an interchange of dialogue in the classroom. Discourse turns its attention to texts from a local level, an institutional level and a societal domain (Rogers, 2002). The local level involves the turn taking during discourse of the teacher and students. The institutional order refers to how the texts, curriculum, and classroom interactions make up the institution of school (Rogers, 2002). Identity formation and the knowledge of freedom/oppression narratives are constructed through the societal domain of discourse (Rogers, 2002). If constructed knowledge is a product of human activity, then meaning is inherently not neutral, therefore it cannot be created or examined through a single perspective. Discourse is the vehicle through which positions are acknowledged, voices are heard, perspectives are recognized. It provides a stage for the unvoiced to finally speak in a democratic system. A strong democratic system relies on equity, however, our society continues to struggle with equity. The struggle consists of giving power to all people, not just who the dominant group considers to be “the people” (Powell, Cantrell & Adams, 2001). Giving power to all people involves giving them a voice in our society. Personal voice developed through discourse is emancipatory to marginalized individuals/groups allowing listeners to construct people’s identities, realities, and social relations (Luke, 2000).

The discourse of critical literacy is not aligned with the traditional IRE (Initiate, Respond, Evaluate) discourse pattern in which a teacher initiates a question, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates their response (Kucer, 2005). This is a more conventional method of discourse that does not always allow all voices to be heard. Also, with this type of dialogue, students strive

to give an answer from the position that the teacher intends for them in order to receive positive feedback from their teacher. Discourse in critical literacy is one in which children are encouraged to bring their own positions to the classroom discussion of socially relevant issues (Flint, 2000) . Student questions, positions, feelings, and responses initiate and determine the direction of the discourse. The result of such discourse can be extending beyond the actual text to create alternative expressions of identity construction (Bean & Moni, 2003).

### **What does research say about using critical literacy?**

#### *What kinds of issues are explored through critical literacy?*

When reviewing the research on the uses of critical literacy, one can find many common themes as to what it is used for and how it is used. Critical literacy is used to explore social issues and initiate social change. First, this discussion will introduce the kinds of issues explored using critical literacy. The options are endless and growing, however, this discussion only provides a glimpse into the possibilities. Critical literacy is certainly not limited to what is presented here. The most prevalent issues occurring in the literature are social justice issues. The theme of social justice also encompasses the ideas of power, equity, perspective, and differing opinions. Comber and Thomson (2001) explored the use of critical literacy in a second/third grade classroom in a low- income school in Australia. The students in this classroom became involved in an urban renewal project in their community after students' lives were thrown into chaos by a redevelopment project in which public housing was reduced, tenants were forced to move, and the social networks in the students lives were disrupted (Comber & Thomson, 2001). This critical literacy opportunity was created from an authentic, personal need for change in the students' worlds. One of the biggest issues that came out of the students' first hand research into the needs of their community was a concern for the state of trees in their

neighborhood, since South Australia is so dry that trees cannot be taken for granted (Comber and Thomson, 2001). These students' purpose for critical literacy was reading their community to solve an environmental issue born out of a social issue.

Social justice issues seen and experienced in their communities are big motivators for students participating in critical literacy events. Rogers (2002) describes a two-year study done with African American Adolescents in an inner-city community in which the social justice issues of freedom and oppression are the focus of their critical literacy study. Rogers held a reading group for an hour to an hour and a half twice a week in the home of a working poor family in the community. Upon arriving at the first session, Rogers noticed that the books being read by these teens voiced only the dominant culture and were not texts in which these students could find their own voice and connection. These books really pointed out how powerful texts can be in establishing who has voice and who doesn't in students' popular culture. Rogers brought in different texts and engaged the reading group in critical readings of books that brought up the issues of freedom, oppression, racism, and segregation. These themes were found in historical texts and then related to the present societal struggles with these same issues. In the same manner, Ciardiello (2004) used the New Orleans desegregation incident of 1960-1961 as a social justice issue to be explored using critical literacy with a seventh grade class in a large northwestern city in the United States. Ciardiello used history to provide the opportunity for students to detect and explore the actions taken by the real life characters involved in the incident. Self-identification with the young activist players in this historical event helped these children understand the relationship between democracy, power, and equity. Powell, Cantrell, and Adams (2001) also used historical events to connect to present issues facing their region by using critical literacy. Black Mountain, found in the southern Appalachian region of the United

States has a history of being a wealth of natural resources. However, the riches of this area often are added to the wealth of very few people, including big corporations. This leaves the region barren and its residents living in an impoverished state (Powell, Cantrell & Adams, 2001). When fourth grade students at Rosenwald-Dunbar Elementary School just south of Lexington, Kentucky were asked to choose a project that was interesting to them, they chose to explore Black Mountain. Their teacher, Sandy Adams, informed the students that Black Mountain was set to be strip-mined. This information sent the students on a critical literacy project to save the mountain. Perspective taking and the examination of differing viewpoints was a key to the students' research when they needed to not only look at the situation from the viewpoint of the inhabitants, but also from the viewpoint of the coal miners. The social issue presented here is another example of an environmental issue, much like the one presented in the research of Comber and Thomson.

A common theme in the research so far presented is that each example of critical literacy stems from the need for a connection between a historical or current event and its value and meaning in the child's life. Tyson (1999) realizes the need for this connection when she worked with seven African American fifth grade males over the course of an academic year. Tyson (1999) became concerned after a conversation with a child led her to the realization that some of the widely used texts in the elementary curriculum (such as *The Three Little Pigs* and *Little Red Riding Hood*) do not engage students who live in an urban setting because they do not relate to their everyday lives. When introducing contemporary realistic fiction to these students, Tyson (1999) saw their supplementation of factual information from their own lives to the fictional accounts portrayed in the stories. These connections led the students to critically examine social problems in their community such as drugs, guns, and homelessness.

*How are these issues explored through critical literacy?*

Critical literacy encourages students to connect to a text or an event on the personal level, on the local level, or on the global level (Comber, Thomson & Wells, 2001). These levels can be visualized as being the rungs on a ladder and students climb up and down the ladder searching for the rung upon which to stand to make a connection and hopefully then to make a change. In the research examples previously presented, one can see how students move along the ladder of critical literacy.

In Ciardiello's (2004) study, he first has students connect to the New Orleans desegregation on a personal level. After looking at different perspectives in a piece of children's literature written about this historical event and exploring segregation at the global level, he then asked the students to think of a time during which their family had different viewpoints about something related to them (Ciardiello, 2004). Relating multiple perspectives to a family situation helped students begin to think about initiating change on a personal level, perhaps by recognizing different perspectives and building understanding based upon this recognition. He connects to the children on a personal level again by relating segregation to the feeling of exclusion. This relationship between a historical event and their own personal lives led the students to engage in community service projects in their community, therefore initiating social change at the local level.

Tyson's (1999) work with seven African American fifth grade males also shows students connecting to text on a personal level, then beginning to explore problems in their communities and suggesting solutions to these problems. Literature served as the vehicle through which connections were made, discussion was initiated, and problems were examined. The book Fly

Away Home by Eve Bunting inspired discussion about local homelessness and the boys own experiences with homelessness. Although homelessness can be a personal, local, and global issue, these boys began addressing solutions only at the local level at first. Upon further discussion of homelessness and drug dealing, the boys were moved to write letters to the President to lobby for help to stop their community's and other community's drug problem, attempting to initiate social change at more of a global level. In a similar manner, Rogers' reading group with African American adolescents in an inner city community began looking at literature to strike a personal connection to local and global social issues. Rogers' (2002) use of literature, history, and discourse prompted her reading group to write letters to Rosa Parks asking her advice about being young advocates in their world. Such advice could inspire these students to become activists in their world.

Also initiating connection at her students' personal levels, Marg Wells began her critical examination of social power by asking students to draw their place in the world as far as what made them happy/worried/angry, what they wished for, what they would change about their lives, and if they thought they had the power to change things (Comber & Thomson, 2001). This assignment moved students from a personal thought, to a local connection, to a global desire for change. Rooting this exploration in the personal connection, Wells moved her students to the local level by addressing some of their concerns about their neighborhood. Students designed a new, environmentally friendly design for their neighborhood including drainage and rubbish bins and sent these designs to project officers and council members.

The story of the fourth graders in Sandy Adam's class who saved Black Mountain is a bit different than the other two studies thus far presented because the primary connection was a local one. The history of the students' region extending to affect a current event prompted this social

action project. Adam's students began by simply wanting to learn about the mountain, they did not set out to save the mountain (Powell, Cantrell, & Adams, 2001). However, the students made such a strong local connection to this story through their perspective taking and critical examination of this situation that they were moved to lobby the legislature to use the mountain for tourism instead of strip mining.

### **What is the importance and outcome of using critical literacy?**

The previous discussion on critical literacy gave examples, although limited, of *why* teachers have used critical literacy (to explore social justice issues) and *how* they have used critical literacy (by making personal, local, and global connections). But what is the purpose of making these connections? Simply making connections between the bad choice of a man who bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building to students' power to make their own decisions does not alone change the world. Discussion by itself cannot make our world a better place if the words of our discourse do not materialize into social movement. In the words of my favorite Nike t-shirt, "Sitting gets you nowhere." Simply sitting on their critical literacy experiences with history, literature, and discussion does not make changes to better the present and future of our students. They need to take action and they need to feel moved to take action. It is my belief, combined with the findings of critical literacy research, that when students are involved in critical literacy experiences and make connections, they are then moved to take a stand, initiate social action, make a change for the better. As a teacher, my goal in providing critical literacy and perspective taking experiences for my students is to help them better understand other people, themselves, and the world around them with the hope that they will take an informed, personal stand to make changes to help our world. Maybe the outcome will be one less bomber, one less school shooting, one less terrorist, one more informed voter, one more doctor crusading

to find a cure for cancer, one more caring citizen using their power for good in order to become an agent of change.

### **How To Use The Program Guide**

Combining my research in critical literacy and my work as the Coordinator of the Oklahoma City Memorial Kids' Marathon resulted in creating a program guide for implementing a curriculum to teach about the Oklahoma City Bombing in elementary schools. The program guide also guides the organization of your school's preparation for the Kids' Marathon. I want to share a few things that will help you use the program guide and understanding it's purpose.

The program guide is in the format of a website. The website includes:

- ❑ An introduction explaining the Oklahoma Memorial Kids' Marathon
- ❑ To Do calendars outlining what you need to do each week of each month leading up to the run; words in ALL CAPS, if clicked, will link you to sample recording keeping documents, notes to send home, etc. Also, within each month's To Do items are tips for keeping your children safe at the Kids' Marathon, as well as other tips to make this experience meaningful and enjoyable.
- ❑ My research rationale for participating in this program
- ❑ Two different curriculums intended to be used the week leading up to the Kids' Marathon. One is for Grades 1 and 2, the other is for Grades 3 through 5. This is a 5 day, approximately 1-2 hour per day lesson set.
- ❑ Two different sets of PASS skills taught through these units – one for Grades 1 and 2, one for Grades 3 through 5.

This website is intended to be a *model* of how to implement and organize this program. It is my hope that teachers and school administrators will adjust and change this program to make it

work for your school according to the unique makeup of your students. I hope you find this helpful as you get started with this program, or as you search for ways to change things that have not worked for you in the past. The purpose of this website is to give you a picture of full participation and implementation of the program. This may not be feasible for all schools, so this program guide is set up in such a way that you can pick and choose what you want to use. For example, you may not choose to use the curriculum, but you may want to try all of the organization strategies. This is your choice. The website represents our hope for the complete experience.

When using the curriculum, remember that the books used can be changed and they should be if you are using this curriculum year after year because you don't want students to become bored with it. However, the format of the lesson can be repeated with different topics and different texts for new experiences year to year. The extensions can be added to lessons too and we know that teachers are creative and will add their own special touches to the key concepts that these units convey.

We strongly recommend that each school who is participating in large numbers designates a school Point of Contact to communicate directly with the Kids' Marathon Coordinator. No matter how you split the duties of implementing this program in your school, it is helpful to have one person (your POC) to email back and forth with the Coordinator to ensure that all the Marathon's registration lists for your school match your roster of participants. This allows the Coordinator and Director to ensure that all your packets (including t-shirts, race bibs, etc) are ready to be picked up in a quick and chaos-free fashion at the race expo. The POC will also be in constant communication with the Coordinator if any questions arise or clarifications need to be made. Please pay special attention to the race day tips offered in each month's To Do

calendar. These are suggested from past experiences to help us make sure that all the children as safe.

Again, feel free to take from this program what works for you and feel free to adjust and modify as you see fit. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please contact the Oklahoma City Memorial Kids' Marathon Coordinator (Shanda Bandi) or the Oklahoma City Memorial Kids' Marathon Race Director (Jaime Parker). Thank you for believing in this event. Your school will certainly have a "run to remember."

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