

Exploring the Role of Transitional Educational Spaces for Novice Critical Literacy Educators

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Abstract

This study used grounded theory to explore personal challenges and contradictions experienced by a novice critical literacy teacher when attempting to practice the principles of critical literacy theory. Although many critical literacy theorists openly criticize banking modes of education, the study suggests that making an immediate transition from authoritarian and traditional transmission teaching to an idealized “self-inquiry” critical thinking context is highly unrealistic. Further, the study posits that personal acknowledgement of pedagogical failure has an upside, and sheds some light on the idea of a transitional learning space that is seldom addressed in the literature—a space comprising a learning curve that moves educators toward the goals of critical literacy pedagogy while acknowledging inherent authoritarian teaching dispositions created by curriculum outcome-driven expectations. By understanding this tension, educators may be more willing to accept small gains as victories.

Exploring the Role of Transitional Spaces for Novice Critical Literacy Educators

In this paper, I propose that the noble aims of critical literacy pedagogy may be too difficult for novice critical literacy teachers to achieve without explicitly anticipating a complicated transitional pedagogical space. This study shows that the implementation of changing pedagogical approaches is not as straightforward as some critical educational literature implicitly suggests. Moreover, this study reveals an upside of failure: If novice critical literacy teachers are able to understand theoretically why failure occurred, they may be more apt to anticipate, navigate, and persevere within the messy terrain of critical literacy pedagogy.

Critical literacy instructional approaches differ from traditional approaches to literacy teaching as the former emphasize the acknowledgment and transformation of power differentials constructed within texts and social practices (Porfilio & Carr, 2010). Successful critical literacy teachers utilize problem-posing strategies to help students develop a critical lens (Freire, 1970/2000). Students who are critically literate master the ability to read and critique messages in a wide range of texts, films, and other diverse visual mediums (e.g., television commercials, photographs, graffiti) and better understand whose knowledge is being privileged (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Essentially, teachers who endorse critical literacy attempt to show learners the role that language plays in the social construction of the self (Lewison, Van Sluys, & Flint, 2006).

Luke and Freebody (1997) emphasize that it is impossible to precisely define critical literacy as its application and aims depend on a host of factors ranging from geographic location and community needs to teacher dispositions and diverse student concerns. However, there are three main overarching and unifying critical literacy foundational assumptions: (a) Literacy is a

social and cultural construction; (b) the functions and uses of literacy are never neutral or innocent; and (c) the meanings constructed in text are ideological and inherently produce, reproduce, and/or maintain unequal arrangements of power (Freire, 1970/2000; Powell, 2001).

Morgan (1997) describes critical literacy instructional practices as a conscious effort by teachers to focus on cultural and ideological assumptions underpinning texts. To elaborate, critical literacy teaching practices examine political agendas behind textual representation by exploring and openly discussing the inequitable and cultural positioning of those who publish work and those who read it within various discourses. Another key feature of critical literacy pedagogy is that it strives to move beyond simply creating an awareness of social inequities; it also aims to lead students and teachers to take action that will facilitate transformational change (Freire, 1970/2000; Giroux, 1997; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Shor & Pari, 1999).

While the adoption of critical literacy theory and practices may seem like a reasonable and noble quest from the outset, I argue that teachers themselves first must reflect critically on how dominant ideologies construct the self and how the constructed self plays out within society before they can prompt students to understand such issues. More specifically, in order to facilitate critical literacy instructional approaches, novice critical literacy teachers must examine deeply how their social and professional identities impinge upon the aims of critical literacy. For example, before commencing this study, I was critically aware of how normative societal views of gender, social class, and race have influenced my way of being and knowing in various ways. To keep the scope of this paper reasonable, I will comment briefly on these intersections and how they pertain to this study.

To unpack my own knapsack, I begin by stating that I am a heterosexual, white, immigrant, European female with working-class roots and I have experienced disadvantages and privileges alike at different times and within different contexts. I have scrutinized, reconstructed, and healed—but have not forgotten—the deep shame that I felt due to societal stigma attached to my membership in a working class, ESL, immigrant group. Thus, I bring an open and compassionate lens to the classroom when encountering working-class and immigrant students. In addition, I *now* also realize that the passion I feel about these particular inequities may not resonate with students, even if their backgrounds are similar to mine. Furthermore, I acknowledge that for some students, and perhaps even some teachers, reflexive practices that bring forth a deeper understanding of inequity may not lead to what I view as ideal actions. For instance, teachers may choose to continue teaching in traditional ways despite their newly gained insight into inequity and the pedagogies that address these issues. I also understand how my hereditary white privilege and current privilege of middle-class status both have provided me with opportunities and options unavailable to some nonwhite working class families. However, having such in-depth knowledge about myself did not prevent me from relinquishing deeply entrenched authoritarian teacher tendencies.

What I am trying to emphasize is that although the productive outcomes of self-reflexive teaching practices are not contested within critical literacy educational literature, critical literacy's value and priority for the novice teacher is underestimated on many levels. In addition to critically reflecting on one's identity as a teacher (as briefly exemplified above), it would be beneficial to critically reflect on how broader educational contexts have shaped, and often limited, teachers'

and students' learning experiences. Ideally, this should be done before engaging in progressive teaching practices such as critical literacy.

Unfortunately, it seems as though authoritarian discourse dominate normative day-to-day teaching practices (Britzman, 1991). By this, I mean to say that teachers generally step into a prescribed teaching role and engage in what Freire (1970/2000) termed a "banking style" of education that views students as empty vessels ready to be filled with factual information. Consequently, teachers who adopt such a model go to great lengths to manage student behaviour, control the learning, and perform as all-knowing experts. What's more, new teachers tend to step into this inherited role without problematizing the traditional banking mode of education or the prescribed teaching practices associated with this style of learning (Britzman, 1991).

Freire (1970/2000) warns that mass societies produce standardized ways of thinking and behaving. Within educational settings, an especially mechanistic form of behaviourism seems to play out among beginning teachers (Britzman, 1991). Freire would suggest that teachers who step into a prescribed teaching role metaphorically take on the role of a machine preprogrammed to perform a certain job in a certain way. When thinking about the way standardized testing and curriculums and teacher accountability have profoundly shaped teachers' pedagogical practices, the teacher-as-machine metaphor seems plausible. Nonetheless, despite the constrained educational context, this paper stresses that teachers can be *self-operating* machines. They have the option to read the manual—in this case, the curriculum—and try to satisfy curricular expectations by way of traditional teaching methods (such as banking education) or they may choose to question traditional, prescribed ways of teaching and learning and adjust their teaching practices to facilitate more effective learning environments, such as through inquiry learning by problem posing. With the latter, the tension between structure and agency creates space for progressive change. But again, silently stepping into a traditionally prescribed teaching position supports the dominant authoritarian teaching discourse, which in turn paves the way for banking modes of education. This scenario does not position the teacher to challenge the banking mode of education and consequently the status quo perseveres.

Primary Objective

This study sought to explore the process of implementing a critical literacy pedagogy in a split grade 4–5 classroom. The study's central question was: How do critical literacy theories inform and influence critical literacy practices and instructional approaches?

Research Design

I incorporated Glaser's (1992) grounded theory approach for data collection and analysis as it provided a systematic and analytical framework application. The data emerged from the observed and documented teaching and learning experiences that occurred throughout the duration of the critical literacy program. I administered the critical literacy program consecutively over a 4-week period. I made daily visits and worked directly with the students from 9:00 a.m. until 10:25 a.m. (their first recess time), and also conducted 15- to 20-minute focus group interviews with three to five students, usually during and occasionally after recess.

Furthermore, I took on what Spradley (1980) refers to as the role of a participant observer during the study. As Spradley suggests, becoming engaged in the activities at the research site offered an ideal opportunity to observe and document participants' actions and responses. I kept daily field notes in order to document the format of each daily lesson and the perceived key events that occurred during each daily visit, and prepared the notes immediately after completing each visit. As part of the grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992), I revisited the field notes to aid in the data analysis throughout the duration of the study.

The procedures of grounded theory (Glaser, 1992) provided the study with an interpretive yet rigorous and disciplined process for generating emerging concepts and investigating the relationships between them. I employed the three-level process of coding, axial coding, and selective coding to develop a general theory to fit the data when examining the focus group transcripts and the documented field notes.

When abiding by Glaser's (1992) systematic principles of data collection and analysis, it was essential to enter the research process with an open mind in regards to what I might find. However, this is different from approaching the study without any assumptions. To elaborate, although I was open-minded regarding the study's outcomes, I used a critical and social constructionist lens during data analysis to draw conclusions. In using a critical and social constructionist theoretical framework to understand and interpret the teaching and learning experiences, my assumption during data analysis was that meaning is socially constructed, historically contingent, and contextually dependent (Britzman, 1991). Also, the critical lens focused on the issues of power and privilege, and therefore this study emphasized that traditional teaching practices should be viewed as problematic and in constant need of deconstruction and reconstruction (Giroux, 1997).

Methods and Procedures

The sample of participants was a convenience sample based on a school board superintendent's recommendation of a junior classroom that met the specified criteria. I made an appointment to meet the principal at the school the superintendent had recommended. The principal and classroom teacher both agreed to participate in the study. The grade 4–5 split classroom consisted of 28 children with rich and culturally diverse backgrounds, and was characterized by both the principal and the classroom teacher as the most challenging group of students within the school.

Focus groups were formed to explore evidence of students' critical text analysis skills and the interactions between the teacher and students. Both semi-structured and open-ended questions were used during the focus group sessions. Focus group conversations were later transcribed and coded with the intention of finding broad and connecting themes. Merton (1987) emphasizes that focus groups are essential when the researcher strategically focuses on interview prompts that will generate relevant themes for the research. The focus group sessions enabled me to capture students' responses, as well as the ways I reacted to and commented on those responses.

The focus group had no more than five and no fewer than three students. The questions asked during the focus group sessions were the same as those posed during the guided reading lessons, and pertained to the applied critical literacy tools taught throughout the program (e.g., Whose voice is missing in the story? Do you see yourself represented in this story?). The focus group sessions were held in a corner of the classroom at a round table that accommodated six individuals. The focus group interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, verified, and deleted thereafter.

My teaching time with students consisted of read-alouds featuring a series of nonmainstream texts (e.g., *Tight Times* by Shook; *A Shelter in Our Car* by Gunning and Pedlar). Participants had the opportunity to discuss issues portrayed in the texts using a critical lens. Students were taught a series of critical literacy tools and were prompted to continuously apply their critical lens using tools such as the questions described above. Every week, I conducted two to three focus groups with students who volunteered to participate. All focus group interviews were conducted after completion of lessons and were usually about 15 minutes in length. Focus group sessions were audio taped, promptly transcribed, and used for data analysis.

After conducting each focus group, I left the classroom setting and made detailed field notes describing the overall format and perceived outcome of the day's lesson. In addition, I documented any conversations that stood out and any relevant reflective ideas.

Main Outcomes and Results

Grounded Theory: Constructing a Transitional Educational Space Through Self-Reflexion, Self-Correction, and Perseverance

Throughout this study, I became keenly aware of the wide gap that exists between *talking* and *reading* about critical literacy, and between *living out* and actually *practicing* critical literacy pedagogy as a novice critical literacy classroom teacher. For example, through a self-reflexive process documented in my daily field notes, I realized that certain ideologies (such as authoritarian pedagogies) took on real meaning only when I attempted to resist their complex and forceful influence. For instance, I became aware of how I unconsciously sought to control many aspects of student learning. To further elaborate, I reinforced the critical answers that I wanted to hear with immediate positive feedback, such as "Wow, I love that answer." I discovered and understood that I had imposed my critical literacy curricular agenda on the students; in short, I wanted them to become critical in the same way that I was. My aim was to make students aware of how unfairly nonmainstream groups are treated and represented through texts. Whenever students provided insight that aligned with my feelings on issues of social inequity, I felt they were learning important information. When I caught myself imposing the learning in these ways, I self-corrected and reminded myself of Freire's (1970/2000) method of problem posing and the importance of self-inquiry learning. My mechanical reaction to my imposed way (i.e., authoritarian style) of teaching was to stop myself and recall the foundational principles of critical literacy—to encourage students to share and reflect upon their stories, voices, and interpretations in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them rather than to me.

The grounded theory shown in Figure 1 illustrates the key themes that emerged as the critical literacy practice unfolded. It is important to note that the disconnected shapes may visually suggest a distinct phenomenon occurring in isolation; however, rather than being isolated from

one another, these phenomena were interrelated and overlapping within the critical literacy teaching and learning research experience.

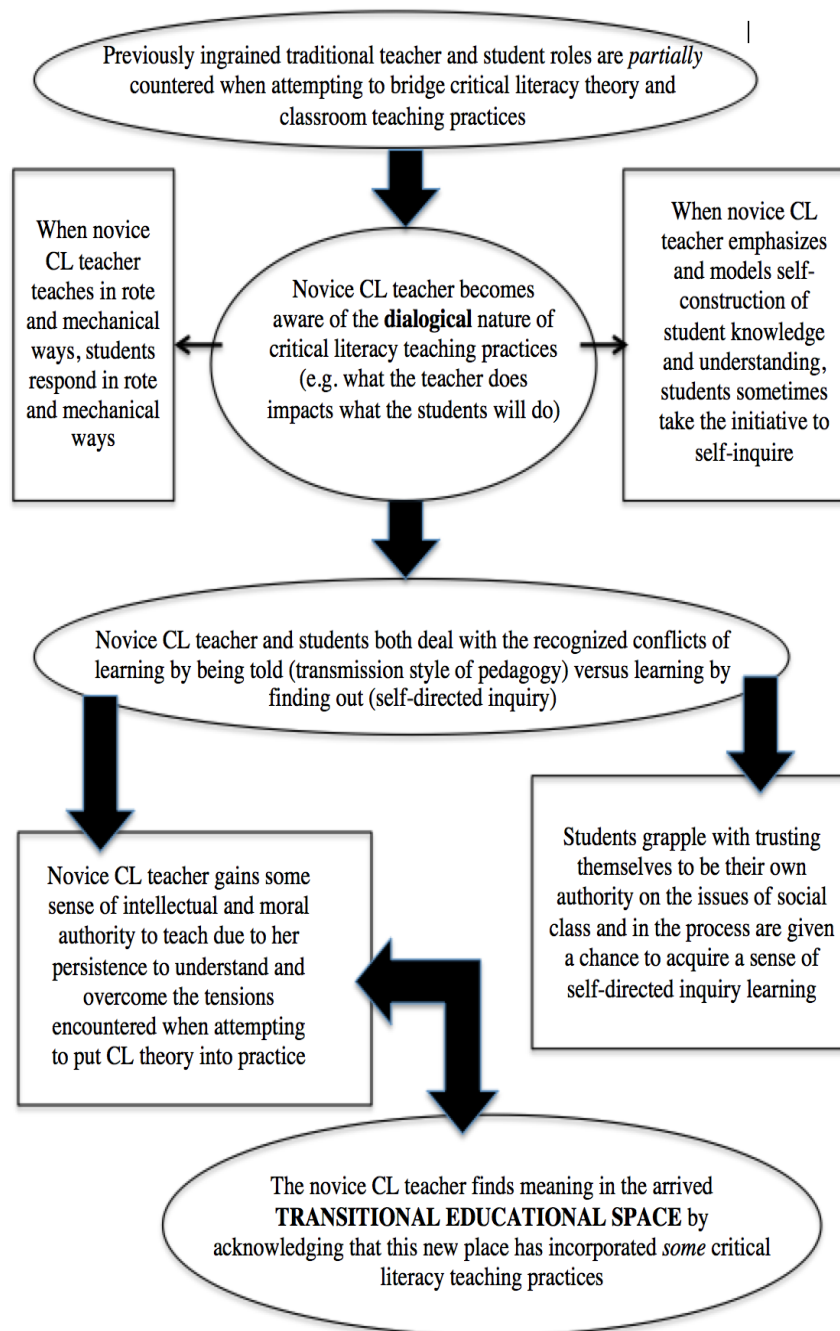


Figure 1. Constructing a transitional educational space through self-reflection, self-correction, focus, and perseverance.

The Dialogical Process of Teaching and Learning

While attempting to engage in critical literacy practices, I became increasingly aware of the dialogical relationship between teachers and students. In fact, continuously acknowledging this interactive relationship was pivotal in making any kind of progress with critical literacy pedagogy. The dialogical relationship between teacher and student can be described as an interactive process in which the action of either party affects the other and intervenes in complex ways. Also worth mentioning here, as Britzman (1991) points out, socialization is not simply what happens to people as they move through a set of experiences. Rather, especially in the context of teaching, it is also necessary to think about *what students make happen, because of what happens to them* (Britzman, 1991). To further elaborate, the relationships between learners and teachers are not simply linear in nature, leading to single specified outcomes, but instead are responsive to and shaped by feedback.

One of the key observations stemming from a conscious and continuous focus on the dialogical nature of teaching and learning was that rote and mechanical teaching produced rote and mechanical answers and understanding. This observation was surprising as I was aware that rote questions would lead to rote answers and had *anticipated* using Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing method as my main tool of teaching. What I came to realize was that the idea of adopting problem-solving instructional approaches, which form the platform for self-inquiry and exploration, sounds easy enough in theory but is much more difficult to implement in practice. The continuous self-reflexive practice propelled my ability to counter my authoritarian teaching tendencies that consistently sought to put information in the student's head. I remained focused on my goal of improving my critical literacy practice and was determined to resist and to refashion the dominant factory model of educational discourse that I had practiced for so long.

As a result of my ongoing struggle to teach in a liberating fashion in which students were encouraged to self-generate knowledge, another main outcome of the study was the identification and acknowledgment of the epistemological conflicts of *learning by being told* versus *learning by finding out*. Although this realization may seem rather simplistic and easily correctable, I discovered after analyzing and re-analyzing the data that many aspects of the implemented critical literacy practice were antithetical to critical literacy pedagogy. For example, I asked many leading questions that would elicit specific kinds of answers. Students who responded with answers that I wanted to hear were encouraged to continue and elaborate whereas other students whom I felt were off track were not given the same time or attention. Nonetheless, I began to pursue the journey of negotiating and reconstructing my own teaching identity.

Part of this personal reconstructive experience involved a major epistemological shift that made me understand more deeply the value in independent knowledge construction. The epistemology of independent knowledge construction contradicts the dominant educational practice of simply transmitting taken-for-granted knowledge from teacher to student; in other words, downloading the facts and accepting them as the essential truths. I will elaborate on this point in the following sections.

Pedagogic Habitus and Cultural Myths

In reflecting on my inadequate critical literacy teaching practice—which consisted of an agenda to help students become critical text analysts; my compulsive tendency to put answers in students' heads; leading questions that would elicit the intended response; and continuous positive reinforcement for answers that I wanted to hear—I started to realize that something was seriously flawed with my teaching approach and that my good intentions would not necessarily bring about the liberating pedagogy that I had sought. The reality was that I had contradicted many of the critical literacy theoretical approaches that I had planned to integrate into this specific teaching experience.

Janks (2000) suggests that a teacher's literate habitus fundamentally effects how literacy is taught in the classroom. Bourdieu (1984) uses the term "habitus" to explain our deeply ingrained and unconscious ways of being. These internalized schemas embody our beliefs, values, and ways of being and doing things. Furthermore, these embodied ways of being are very resistant to change (Bourdieu, 1991). Changing our pedagogic habitus and ingraining a new one requires meticulous and constant attention, as our old habits are just below the surface. As Janks explains, just as our habitus is difficult to change, so too is our pedagogic habitus:

Our pedagogic habitus is formed by years spent in school as students, by the teachers who taught us, the books we have read, the education departments and schools we have worked in and the colleagues we have worked with. It is embodied in the way we talk to children, where we position ourselves in the classroom, how we stand, what we do with our eyes, and how we expect our students to comport themselves. Our embodied practices are bound up with ingrained beliefs about education and what we value in students. We have to want to change and we have to work at it. (p. 201)

As expressed throughout this study, my experience with critical literacy aligns well with Janks's (2010) and Bourdieu's (1984) views that explicitly illustrate the challenges associated with changing both one's habitus and pedagogical habitus. Interestingly, attempting to leap from one style of pedagogy to another not only was difficult for me but also challenging for students. When auto-correcting my authoritarian teaching approach and engaging in practices that more closely resembled the problem-posing and self-inquiry aspects of critical literacy, students seemed confused; they did not automatically and smoothly seek their own answers to my critical open-ended questions. In fact, they often resisted taking on the power and control required in the self-inquiry process of learning. The students often struggled with trusting themselves as their own authority on issues of gender, race, and class equity. Furthermore, they wanted to be told what to do, so they could complete the assigned task as quickly as possible. Also, the students wanted the answers told to them, rather than finding the answers on their own, and they often asked for confirmation or reassurance of what they had voiced during our discussions. The value seemed to be in simply getting the right answer, versus valuing and being engaged in the process of constructing their own knowledge.

Was it reasonable for me to expect anything different? Students' school life had been anchored in Freire's (1970/2000) concept of a banking style of education and it seemed that their student identity and school-related habitus reflected this reality. It seemed also that students would need

an extended period of time to transform their oppressed student identity into one that embraces choice, exploration, and educational experiences that are valuable and meaningful to them. The disappointing reality was that this type of transformation would only be possible if students were immersed in a *continuous* educational experience that fostered their *own* construction of knowledge. Spivak's (2004) comprehensive notion of an "uncoercive rearrangement of desires" (p. 5) explains how educators may foster inquiry-based learning and the authentic deconstruction of texts. Spivak suggests that such a shift may occur through explicit acknowledgment and critical assessment of the inherited colonial mindset, both within the teaching self as well as the broader social, political, and cultural context. To elaborate, Spivak posits that educators can create empowering educational contexts if they acknowledge and reconstruct certain facets of the colonial mentality, such as an ingrained sense of supremacy over students (especially marginalized students) and a tendency to emphasize student obedience and control, as well as to engage in a superior moral activism in order to right those who have been wronged. The latter point is especially relevant to this study because underneath the supposed good intention to help or perhaps even save students via critical literacy teaching practices, teachers (like myself) may either consciously or unconsciously believe they are better than the students who are wronged by societal inequity. As Spivak argues, this creates the space for *coercive desires* to play out in the classroom. In other words, teachers feed into their sense of superiority and teach children what they feel the latter need to know to address such a perceived deficiency. Although I am of course reluctant to admit having adopted such teaching practices on some level, aspects of the colonial mindset resonate with my own novice critical literacy teaching experiences.

As I continued to reflect upon and struggled to answer many *why* questions during my investigation, Deborah Britzman's research became pivotal in my search for meaning. Britzman's (1991) work on the naturalized cultural myths that teachers often incorporate into their teaching identity elucidated why it is difficult to practice new and progressive pedagogies such as critical literacy. Britzman explains that due to the mass experience with public education, teaching has become one of the most familiar professions within our culture. Due to this overexposure, certain prescribed teaching orientations and dispositions tend to dominate our thinking, and both legitimize and naturalize specific teaching practices. Therefore, pedagogy is founded not on the production of knowledge but rather on public image. This public teaching image prescribes that: (a) everything that happens in the classroom depends on the teacher, (b) the teacher is the expert, and (c) the teacher is self-made (Britzman, 1991). I will briefly explain each cultural myth, as these dramatically impacted my epistemological perspectives.

The Three Cultural Myths of Teaching

Everything depends on the teacher.

The first cultural myth is premised on the normative cultural expectation within compulsory education that the teacher must establish control of the classroom or there will be no learning, as well as the belief that students will control the teacher if the teacher does not control the students (Britzman, 1991). In this perspective, students' learning is viewed as a product of social control. This pressure to control impacts the style of teaching practice and constructs views about knowledge and the knower (Britzman, 1991). Understanding this premise may facilitate

the transition from traditional pedagogical approaches to more progressive teaching styles that emphasize self-inquiry and problem posing. For example, the institutional mandate to control students' learning forces teachers to practice a pedagogy that downloads knowledge. This prevents teachers from engaging in teaching practices that guide students to produce knowledge and critically examine their relationship to it. Critical literacy pedagogy is founded on the premise that students are not just learners; rather, they arrive in the classroom *already knowledgeable*. This essential point is disregarded when teachers play out the role of an institutional authority figure and unilaterally control students and learning alike. This line of thought helped me to better understand my authoritative teaching style and it may also help other novice critical literacy teachers who experience tension and dissonance during the process of change.

The teacher is the expert.

The second cultural myth is premised on yet another normative cultural expectation that "good" teachers must know how to teach and be highly informed on the curriculum that they are teaching. Facing such pressure to know everything, teachers often feel compelled to be certain with their knowledge and in effect present information as unquestionable facts (Britzman, 1991). Therefore, while teachers live out this myth, knowledge is reduced to the immediate problem of knowing and transmitting the so-called right answers. Likewise, teachers who master the curriculum are perceived as highly competent and skilled, however in reality this type of knowledge is confined to multiple years of textbook usage and reiteration. "The teacher is expert" myth distracts educators from realizing that knowledge is a construct that can be deconstructed and transformed by the learner (Britzman, 1991). In addition, it prevents teachers from critically questioning and exploring how we come to know, how we learn, and how we are taught.

Teachers are self-made.

The final cultural myth draws attention to the notion that we believe our teaching is a product of our experience, our unique process of *learning how to teach*, and that we develop our self-directed teaching styles without any outside influences. The myth that teachers "make themselves" directs us into an essentialist discourse that devalues reflecting on "how we come to know," and in essence we ignore the historical forces and institutional structures that shape our teaching identity (Britzman, 1991). The belief we are self-made alienates us from the reality that our pedagogy is highly influenced by complex social interactions, school cultures, and the larger social world. This myth exaggerates the role of personal autonomy within teaching and encourages a stance of anti-intellectualism.

These three problematic yet normative teaching personas reaffirm a false sense of power by the teacher and are antithetical to creating critical classrooms that acknowledge the oppressive inequities of gender, race, and class. My previous teaching identity unquestioningly and uncritically incorporated such teaching myths. However, due to the fact that I never critically thought about my professional teaching role as being socially constructed, I was not able to conceptually understand how broader societal contexts constrained my teaching practice. After becoming critically aware of how societal norms dictated my teaching practice, I came to realize that my previous good intentions and desire to make a difference in the lives of children whom I

taught did not create sufficient liberating teaching practices. Rather, as I have found over the course of this study, the ability to construct knowledge independently has the potential to create transcendent learning experiences—for teachers and students alike. Biesta (2012) has articulated productively what I have finally come to deeply understand: “the point of education is never that children or students learn, but that they learn *something*, that they learn this for particular *purposes*, and that they learn this from *someone*” (p. 36). I further draw on Biesta’s work in the next section to highlight how the cultural context has significantly shaped the role of the teacher and then share ways in which one may navigate this complex terrain.

Critical Reflection Within Transitional Educational Spaces

In order to productively navigate the complex *transitional educational space* of the novice critical literacy teacher, it may be helpful to understand some of the broader contextual barriers that seep into our local schools and individual classrooms. Biesta (2012) problematizes the broader authoritarian educational context and describes its driving ideology:

The best and most effective teachers are the ones who are able to steer the whole educational process towards the production of pre-specified “learning outcomes” or pre-defined identities, such as that of the “good citizen” or the “flexible lifelong learner.” The call for control—and for teachers to exert control—is often part of a wider moral panic about an alleged loss of authority in contemporary society, accompanied by the common “reflex” that education is the key instrument for restoring authority. (p. 35)

Biesta (2012) goes on to explain that our current societal notion of teaching has been reduced to matters of control. Consequently, students learn to obey and follow the “natural” world in which they are positioned rather than critically reflect on *how* and *why* they are positioned and the implications of such positioning (Biesta, 2013; Britzman, 1991; Freire, 1970/2000). For instance, students may not be as likely to critically view themselves as members of gendered, classed, and racialized groups that experience both privilege and oppression across time, space, and context. As mentioned earlier, the intention of my critical literacy practice was to counter the authoritarian transmission mode of teaching so that students could begin to develop the critical lens necessary to understand structural inequity. However, this task was much more challenging than I had anticipated.

As Britzman (1991) has pointed out, the repressive model of teacher identity prescribes that teachers constrain their subjectivity (i.e., personal analysis and views) to assume an objective teaching persona (i.e., one that is prescribed and unquestioned). Within this realm, the teacher’s identity and the teacher’s role become one and the same. However, and as I have come to experience personally, a teacher’s identity and the culturally prescribed teacher’s role can indeed be separate. This is where many of the contradictions and tensions occur. To further elaborate, roles are about functions, and while functions can be prescribed, identity cannot. Identity requires consent, and can be socially negotiated (Britzman, 1991). Acknowledging and acting on this gained perspective has allowed me to break the cycle of blindly following the prescribed role of teaching and has made me think deeply about what I truly value about learning and teaching.

The term “authoritarian” has been mentioned repeatedly throughout this paper. The concept of authoritarian teaching will be given more attention here as it has contributed to yet another newly gained epistemological stance. First, it is necessary to explain the difference between being *authoritarian* and being an *authority* within the classroom, and how this affected the construction of the critical literacy program. In the context of teaching and critical literacy practices, authority can be categorized as empowering or repressive (Gore, 1993). Empowering authority, when endorsed by the critical literacy teacher, has the ability to create environments that enable students to empower themselves. This is done by engaging in liberatory teaching and learning practices with the ultimate goal of transforming society. Critical analysis and independent knowledge construction are essential within this paradigm. On the other hand, repressive authority, which is more closely associated with authoritarianism, is enacted in the dominant style of transmission pedagogy, whereby the teacher is viewed as all powerful and all knowing and controls all aspects of learning (Gore, 1993). The tension between these two oppositional types of authority caused personal cognitive dissonance throughout the duration of the study.

My critical literacy teaching practice mostly reflected a repressive style of authority which was evidenced by the fact that I had imposed my agenda of transforming students into critical text analysts and making them aware of the inequities of gender, race, and class. This was what I truly felt was important for the students to learn and I was determined to transmit this knowledge to them. The opportunity to implement and document the critical literacy teaching experience enabled me to discover that I had downloaded my own curriculum onto the students, at the expense of guiding them to construct their own knowledge and finding their own voice, or essentially leading them to a path of liberation. Biesta’s (2013) work, which moves beyond Freire’s (1970/2000) problem-posing method into transcendental learning, is also relevant as it probes even deeper into the conceptual role of the critical literacy educator. Biesta (2013) distinguishes between the idea of “learning from” and “being taught” and emphasizes that teachers should embrace the latter. Within the limited paradigm of “learning from,” the teacher has internalized the process of learning as the accumulation, mastery, and reproduction of existing knowledge. On the other hand, the notion of “being taught” refers to

experiences where someone showed us something or made us realise something that really entered our being from the outside. Such teachings often provide insights about ourselves and our ways of doing and being; insights that we were not aware of or rather did not want to be aware of. (Biesta, 2013, p. 449).

In this sense, the experience of “being taught” is conceptualized as the process of sharing truths that will be reinterpreted and reorganized in ways that are genuinely and deeply meaningful for the students and their unique lives both inside and outside of the classroom (Biesta, 2013). This type of revelation knowledge, also referred to as transcendental knowledge, will be unique to each student. Also, it is important to realize, as I did through this study, that one’s personal transcendental knowledge may not resonate with students. Thus, we must hold back the urge to insist our revelations will be as meaningful for our students as they were for us. What I mean to say is that while teachers can and should share transcendental learning experiences with students, we must be careful not to force them upon students as their own truths. In theory this kind of approach to teaching may seem simple but in practice, for me at least, it was much more challenging than anticipated.

So where does one go from here? Roosevelt (2007) provides perspective in understanding the messiness that occurs in transitional educational spaces. Roosevelt's research emphasizes that the fundamental task of "learning to teach" and forming a strong teaching identity is directly founded on *earning* "intellectual and moral authority" (Roosevelt, 2007). Intellectual and moral authority are earned when one is committed to the process of continually learning to teach well. In our commitment to teach well, Roosevelt suggests we become active agents who recognize the multitude of conflicts that surface in our teaching realities, and it is our continuous struggle to resolve these contradictions that earns us the "moral and intellectual authority" to teach. As Britzman (1991) remarks:

Indeed, negotiating among what may seem to be conflicting visions, disparaging considerations, and contesting interpretations about social practice and teacher's identity is part of the hidden work of learning to teach. This unmapped territory, then, must be chartered in ways that can permit a double consciousness of how systemic constraints become lived as individual dilemmas. (p. 3)

Throughout this paper, I have highlighted the fact that I did not create the critical literacy teaching and learning environment that I had anticipated. However, I have realized that from the beginning of the study, I had unintentionally set myself up for failure. I believed that I could simply download a critical literacy agenda onto the students and then claim that my mission was accomplished. My attempt to practice critical literacy has highlighted the complexities of this teaching approach and has transformed my epistemological perspectives of knowledge, power, and identity in very significant ways. Unfortunately, I cannot claim to have created a liberating critical literacy teaching practice. However, I do believe that the failed attempt—and the constructive learning that occurred during the messiness of the process—has created an initial transitory educational space that has moved my teaching practice away from the dominant transmission style of pedagogy. This transitional educational space is productive in that it has the potential to continue to refine and improve my empowering critical literacy teaching practices.

Conclusion

In order to resist the power of traditional authoritarian teaching and banking modes of pedagogy, teachers must recognize how deeply such values and practices are entrenched. This study suggests that awareness of one's traditional pedagogical habitus will occur not merely by reading about alternative pedagogies but rather by attempting to put these alternative pedagogical theories into practice. The novice critical literacy practitioner may experience and come to understand these forces' resiliency through failed teaching attempts. In attempting to facilitate critical literacy pedagogy it is essential that we *practice what we preach* and begin to resist dominant teaching ideologies that reproduce the status quo and continue to oppress some groups at the expense of others. Although the theory and claims made within this paper may resonate with other teachers and educational stakeholders, it is important to note that the suggested theoretical conclusions are limited as they were developed by a single participant. The grounded theory and associated interpretative statements are open for discussion and critique and are positioned as socially constructed partial truths. In other words, as the researcher and theory builder, I am aware that my biases and world views influenced my

selection of experiences and ideas discussed in this paper—hence the phrase “socially constructed partial truths.”

The opportunity to be both the researcher and the novice critical literacy teacher provided many moments of deep reflection that disrupted my false sense of confidence when implementing a new pedagogy. Initially, I felt that my attempt to practice critical literacy was bound to fail as I contradicted the foundational pillar of critical literacy, namely facilitating student voice and choice. However, the results in this study show that making the leap from a traditional type of pedagogical practice to critical literacy pedagogy is not a straightforward process. The overall theme of this article emphasizes that the initial process of stepping into the ideal role of the novice critical elementary classroom teacher can be fraught with dissonance, contradiction, and ambiguity. The research results suggest that teachers who are new to critical literacy instructional approaches may have difficulty resisting their own deeply internalized authoritarian teaching personas. Therefore, even though novice critical literacy teachers may intend to utilize Freire’s (1970/2000) problem-posing instructional method to create a space for *learning by finding out*, the authoritarian habitus may unintentionally continue to shape educational experiences that give rise to *learning by being told*. Managing the tension, dissonance, and contradictions that are likely to occur when attempting to put progressive pedagogies such as critical literacy into practice may be lessened and better understood by anticipating a transitional educational space.

Learning to facilitate critical literacy pedagogy and to establish classroom practices founded on principles of self-inquiry and independent critical analysis is a challenging pursuit. Success in this area seems to require some major epistemological shifting on the part of the novice critical literacy teacher. The epistemologies of independent knowledge construction open up the potential for deeply understanding how one is positioned and responsive to particular orientations of power, knowledge, and identity. Without struggling through a transitional educational space and anticipating the conceptual shifting and sorting of competing teaching ideologies, teachers may remain powerless in the process of change and transformation. The transitional educational space highlighted within this study provides an explicit critical juncture through which novice critical literacy teachers may persevere, or they may decline the challenge and revert to their traditional pedagogical habitus.

Although this study presents the idea that teachers can choose the type of pedagogy they will enact, in reality this choice may at times be misleading and superficial. In other words, the line between critical progressive pedagogies and traditional transmission modes of pedagogy is complex and contested. To elaborate, the overarching purpose of teaching practices such as critical literacy and critical pedagogy, both founded on critical social theory, is the liberation and emancipation of marginalized or disadvantaged students (Freire, 1970/2000; Giroux, 1985; Giroux & McLaren, 1994). Feminist scholars such as Ellsworth (1989) and St. Pierre and Pillow (2000) argue that contemporary critical pedagogies are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination. Ellsworth suggests that critical pedagogy is too prescriptive and therefore exacerbates oppressive conditions (e.g., banking education, Eurocentricism, racism, sexism, and classism) instead of leading to empowerment, voice, dialogue, and ultimately a desired state of critical consciousness.

Still, the reader may ask how so? According to St. Pierre and Pillow (2000) and other feminist

scholars, the rationalism prescribed by critical teaching practices stipulates that students should deeply explore and analyze who they *should be* and what should be happening in society versus *what is* (e.g., a society filled with social inequity). Such analysis first involves a “critical consciousness” of how ideology has influenced and constrained individuals. Thereafter, it is up to the individual—or preferably a group of individuals with collective goals—to become active in making changes/transformations. However, as Ellsworth (1989) points out, it is impossible to include and address all diverse voices with equal weight and legitimization, and consequently it is difficult to create an effective action plan to end this specific oppression. When critically conscious students attempt to validate and justify their oppressive experiences and propose active solutions that are more reasonable to pursue *over others*, we have a clear case of domination occurring in the classroom. This scenario exemplifies another layer of complexity and even further elevates the importance of Spivak’s (2004) notion of the “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” discussed earlier.

Overall, my hope is that in sharing my struggles in the process of “learning to teach well,” others may be inspired to begin to share their own subjective experiences within this realm. As noted throughout this paper, “learning to teach well” and making the leap from one style of pedagogy to another is not always an easy or straightforward process, and knowing this may relieve some of the experienced tensions, self-doubt, and feelings of inadequacy. In addition, this insight may highlight a teacher’s ingrained pedagogical habitus and consequently shine a light on the ways that dominant educational discourses shape teaching practices. If novice critical literacy teachers become aware of the likelihood of entering a transitional educational space, they may be better able to anticipate and plan for an element of messiness and incremental improvements. This approach sets up the novice critical literacy teacher with realistic and more attainable teaching expectations. These attainable expectations would include continuous small changes in instructional approaches that in turn would develop teaching practices that more closely resemble the foundational theoretical frameworks of critical literacy.

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