The intersection of critical literacy and moral literacy: Implications for practice

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Currently schools in Ontario are focused on literacy and numeracy standards to prepare students for norm-referenced standardized tests that establish a competitive environment among students. Educators however have begun to recognize the need to move beyond focusing solely on skill acquisition to developing critical thinking and good character in children if they are to become democratic, tolerant and compassionate citizens of the world. Critical literacy and moral literacy are gathering increasing attention in educational discourse. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to deconstruct critical literacy and moral literacy and articulate the basic tenets of both. This paper will also illuminate the points of intersection between these two concepts and identify some potential strategies to enable teachers to translate critical and moral literacy theories into practice across the curriculum.

Introduction

In the past, parents were most likely to transmit societal values to their children and were the main force in forming children’s character (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004). Most often, children were taught to become good citizens by adhering to religious or cultural beliefs in the context of parental approval, rarely questioning the righteousness of the decisions made on their behalf. School has also been a place where they were taught about good citizenship and moral values. Children were required to be ‘good’, to respect the laws and the rights of others, and to be concerned for the common good. Although all three social institutions—the family, the church and the school—still have impact on children’s moral development, the increased influence of popular culture represented in the media has created an additional source of dissonance which may create confusion for some children (Hoffman, 2000).

Today’s pace is very fast, highly competitive, and consumer-oriented and our children and youth are spending vast amounts of time engaged in the active and interactive use of media such as playing video games, surfing the net, or listening to their I-pods. Research found that on average, children spend over five hours every day, seven days a week, with different kinds of media (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). Young Canadians in a Wired World – Phase II (2005), the study conducted on more than 5,200 children and youth from grade 4-11, looked at the children’s online behaviors, attitudes, and opinions (Media Awareness Network, 2005). They found 94% of children go online on an everyday basis. It may suggest that today’s e-generation of children have less and less time to spend on introspection, reflection and careful decision-making.

The multitude of sometimes contradictory messages found in popular “cool” culture requires the careful exercise of personal judgment, and some children do not have a moral touchstone upon which to make ethically correct decisions. How are they to develop those judgments in schools which are highly focused on standardized testing and a curriculum that
is based largely on content and skill acquisition? It appears evident that there is a growing need to go beyond focusing on skill acquisition to developing critical thinking and good character in children if they are to become democratic, tolerant and compassionate citizens of the world. Recognizing these issues, the Ontario Ministry of Education recently introduced Critical Media Literacy (2006) and Character Education (2008) as an integral part of the curriculum. Critical Media Literacy explores the impact and influence of mass media and popular culture by examining texts such as films, songs, video games, action figures, magazines, newspapers and other popular media. These texts abound in our video information age, and the messages they convey may have a tremendous influence on our children’s lives (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). For this reason, critical thinking becomes necessary in order to provide students with understanding of the difference between fact and fiction, enabling them to critically interpreting the messages they receive through the various media. Character Education is intended to promote moral literacy and to “develop school environments in which all people--students, teachers, administrators and support staff--treat each other with care and respect” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p.21). This initiative is based on academic achievement, character development, citizenship development and respect for diversity.

Critical Literacy and Moral Literacy are gathering increasing attention in educational discourse, and therefore will be further discussed in this paper for the purpose of illuminating the points of intersection between these two concepts, and the importance of developing both in young democratic citizens.

**Critical Literacy**

The texts that children encounter in their lives, both in and out of school, are cultural in nature and contribute strongly not only to the way they build their identities but also to their beliefs, values, and worldviews (Luke, 2000). Through these encounters, they seek to interpret the world and to determine their place in it (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Hobbs, 2007). The meaning of the term “texts” has moved beyond the printed word to include digital text which is nonlinear, multimodal and visual. Lately, children have become frequent users of digital text through use of MSN, Twitter, Face Book, My Space and other on line sources of information and communication. This shift poses a challenge for educators as print text which is pervasive in schools is ruled by sequence and time, whereas images which are pervasive in media are governed by space, display and simultaneousness (Kress, 2003; Kress & Leeuwen, 2001). Lemke (1997) argues that these new meanings in multimedia are flexible, in the way that word-meaning and picture-meanings are constantly intertwined, where word-meaning is transformed by image-context, and image-meaning in turn is changed by textual context. Many of these images can be very powerful because they are presented as part of the popular culture which can carry messages that may be misinterpreted. For instance, clever manipulation of images by manufacturers, advertisers, and designers often presents images that can manipulate young children’s perception about reality. This can be dangerous because an idea or story that is presented through popular media texts may carry the inference that these values are endorsed by society or at least some parts of society. As a result, these massages can contribute to maintaining or creating injustices or inequities (Freire & Macedo, 1987). It becomes increasingly evident that the skills required to navigate through these confusing messages must be taught explicitly if children are to develop a personal moral landscape. For instance, children can be taught the
skill of asking themselves specific questions while they read or view any kind of text. Such questions can include, “Whose point of view is or is not represented in the text?”, or “What is the author’s point of view?”, and “Do I agree or disagree, and why?”

As educators become more aware of this phenomenon, critical literacy has emerged as a renewed focus in the late 20th century. Students are encouraged to read from a critical stance that moves beyond comprehending the text to understanding the power relationships revealed through the text. The basic tenet is that the author created the text from a particular perspective and for a particular purpose and the reader has the right and obligation to critique, question and analyze the ideas and the content from multiple perspectives (Fresch, 2007). According to Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002, p. 382) critical literacy involves four dimensions: 1) disrupting the commonplace, 2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and 4) taking action and promoting social justice. Such a definition clearly moves well beyond mere passive comprehension of text to the readers’ active engagement with the ideas and values and how they may connect to current social dynamics. Digital texts, for instance, are encountered in their nonlinear visual nature, and students need to read and understand these texts as critical consumers and producers as well (Dalton & Proctor, 2008). The meaning of critical literacy ranges from a reader’s critical analyses of different kinds of texts (Freebody, 2005), to Gee’s (2001, p. 37) “socially perceptive literacy”. As defined by Luke (1997), and later supported by Gee (2001) and Edelsky and Cherland (2006), critical literacy is based on sociological, cultural, and discourse theory and serves to re-conceptualize literacy education, and classroom pedagogy in general. Luke states that:

Critical approaches are characterized by a commitment to reshape literacy education in the interest of marginalized groups of learners, who on the basis of gender, cultural and socioeconomic background have been excluded from access to the discourses and texts of dominant economics and cultures (Luke, 1997, p. 143).

In this particular context, the aim of critical literacy in the classroom is to help both the children and the teachers to understand the process of how deconstructing words and ideas coupled with their background experience helps them to construct their own worlds. Our students should be able to “read the world” (Freire, 1978; Freire & Macedo, 1987) after they become able to read, understand and critique the text as it reveals the world of ideas. The purpose of literacy according to Livingstone, Couvering and Thumim (2008) is to encourage active participation in a democracy, to have the knowledge to understand the economy, competitiveness and choices and to become life long learners. This understanding of the critical component of literacy moves far beyond traditional versions of instruction that focus primarily on comprehension. According to Durrant and Green (2000), literacy must have three intertwining dimensions: the operational, the cultural, and the critical. All three of them bring together language, meaning and context and, therefore, literacy in practice and in pedagogy needs to address all three dimensions simultaneously. From their perspective, any concern with reading, writing, and literacy interconnects with social practices and integrates talk, action, values, beliefs, and behavior. That is, literacy as meaningful practice is always inherently bound up with the individual’s existence in this world. An important part of the successful application of critical literacy is to recognize individual differences and a
desire to accommodate all students in the process of constructing and being constructed in the discourse (Foucault, 1983; Leland & Harste, 2005).

In current literacy practice, teachers generally place an emphasis on similarities rather than differences, and ignore the particular sets of cultural and social norms and values that students bring into their classrooms. Students construct their new knowledge based on their previous cultural experience, values and beliefs, and in that light, interpret new information (Bandura, 1986; Bruner, 1986, Piaget, 1932). This is particularly problematic considering the diversity of cultural backgrounds found in most Canadian classrooms today. We argue that, through the successful implementation of critical literacy, students not only use their previous experience in constructing new meanings, but also use these new meanings in deconstructing previous knowledge and in applying it in practice. We are not trying to imply that digital literacies are inherently without moral foundation; rather we assert that readers should critically interrogate the potential interpretation and impact of those messages.

**Moral Literacy**

In a society that becomes more complex and technologically advanced, our children are faced with many ethical challenges and are constantly called upon to make ethical choices. Where to turn for advice? There is an enormous pressure in schools and in society to create learning environments to address and further explore these issues. Will moral literacy provide the opportunity for young people to naturally engage in reflection and discussion about issues of identity, in particular personal and moral values? Tuana (2007) proposes that moral literacy is as important as math and language literacy and needs to be considered as an essential part of educational practice. She defines moral literacy as an interconnected set of skills and knowledge necessary to make right ethical choices and explains that:

Moral literacy involves a multifaceted set of skills that can and should be enhanced through education. Just like reading and math literacy, while we certainly hope that moral literacy is developed and reinforced in out-of-school contexts, a critical component of our children’s education should be to ensure that they have the opportunity to strengthen these skills and refine these abilities as they grow and mature (Tuana, 2007, p.376).

Children can gain these skills and the knowledge within the school setting as well as in the broader environment. Teachers also need to recognize their moral responsibilities as ethical professionals and according to Campbell (1997) “appreciate the significance of their own actions and decisions of the students in their care” (p. 256). Teachers’ obligation in promoting moral literacy is to create the environment in which every student is treated with respect, and to “give every student genuine voice and responsibility’ (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 68). According to Hall, Larson and Marsh (2003) critical literacy serves to challenge inequalities in society and must promote a strong participatory democracy. Moral literacy serves not only to promote social justice but also to further enhance moral skills such as sensitivity to others, a critical approach to moral dilemmas, and care for both others and themselves. To support this argument, Noddings (1992, 2000) suggests that teachers have an obligation to model positively for children, and to create opportunities for constant dialogue in order to reach common understanding and care for others. Noddings also appeals for “confirmation of the good in others” (p. 48), and stresses the importance of the
development of lasting, positive relationships among children, rather than developing traits of individualism.

Current Character Education practices in Ontario advocate that teaching character is a necessity, but there is little consensus about how to teach it. As a result, many teachers either teach from a prescribed program established by their boards, or do very little. Some teachers still hold the assumption that if readers are simply exposed to morality in an inspiring book, then they will able to “catch it...by (literary) content alone” (Shor, 1999, p. 14). Contrary to these perspectives we argue that character education should not be introduced through the “building” of good character, and educators should not be seen as architects in possession of blue prints ready for implementation. Rather we believe that in order to develop morally literate individuals, they need to be involved in ongoing discourse of multiple moral perspectives. Clearly, there is no single recipe for developing a moral landscape that honors diverse cultural experiences. Moral literacy therefore, involves a complex set of skills and habits that should be cultivated and enriched through education and is necessary if schools wish to educate children to become responsible citizens (Tuana, 2007).

Traditionally, character education has focused on actions and values appropriate for the industrial age such as obedience to authority, and has usually relied on compliance without questioning. In contemporary education, character development needs to be based on culturally shared values appropriate for the informational age such as honesty, integrity, and individual responsibility.

The Intersection of Moral and Critical Literacy

As everyday social and educational experiences contain moral dimensions, we argue that moral literacy is inherently embedded in critical literacy. Powell (1999) argues that:

> Literacy as a moral imperative envisions language as functioning in a transformative way --as a means for seeing the world differently--so that we might begin to construct a more humane and compassionate society (p. 20).

Thus, both critical and moral literacy should involve the analysis and critique of the text and language as well as underlying issues of moral values and beliefs. As such, students should be directed in discussion of issues such as fairness, tolerance, compassion and integrity in what they read, write, or watch. It is imperative that children come to understand that different moral values and beliefs are held by different cultural groups (Luke, 1997). It is equally imperative that they be encouraged to be tolerant and compassionate about these differences. Shor (1999) argues that critical literacy “involves questioning received knowledge [from text] and immediate experience with the goal of disrupting grand narratives, challenging stereotypes and inequality and developing an activist citizenry” (p. 8). It is evident that critical literacy does not stand alone, but rather is very much interrelated with a critical approach to different moral issues and ethical decisions.

In their latest document Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools, K-12 (2008), the Ontario Ministry of Education states that:
There is a need to recommit ourselves to the central mission of schooling - to transmit from one generation to the next the habits of mind and heart that are necessary for good citizenship to thrive (p. 8).

It seems to us that this proposal is more about maintaining the present social order based on old habits of mind and heart rather than developing critically and morally literate citizens of the future. Without clear and concise understanding of what is meant by character education in the mosaic of today's society and without recognizing that diversity in Canadian classrooms, character education seems doomed to flounder (Bajovic, Rizzo, & Engemann, 2008). Thus, it appears to us that character education that is promoted in schools today may be limited by the perspective of the dominant Canadian society. Narvaez (2002) points out:

... traditional character educators view moral themes (and moral virtues) like biological gene packets that are passed from one generation to the next. Consequently, they seem to be stuck in a 19th century understanding of human development and learning. They appear ignorant of current knowledge about human learning that emphasizes such things as novice-to expert learning and the construction of meaning (p. 168).

Powell (1999) describes the present approach to critical literacy as a reflection of the large society “contrived within a competitive and meritocratic social system that gives some of the authority to establish the criteria for evaluation, and hence the authority to define failure” (p.12). Unfortunately, it seems that we are still teaching what we did in residential schools with our native population where one moral and societal stance was seen to fit all. And, it needs to be confronted. If the democratic needs of our diverse population are to be met in this process, multiple approaches to moral development must be identified and interrogated in schools. Thus, a democratic society requires both critical and moral literacy: critical literacy to empower and lead to transformative action and moral literacy to acknowledge the differences of power in society and ‘seek to realize a more equitable, just, and compassionate community’ (Powell, 1999, p.23). When this is achieved, students will begin to be able to honor the universality of the human condition as well as to respect the diversity inherent in a multicultural society.

Proposed Classroom Strategies for Implementation of Critical and Moral Literacy

We propose that the integration of critical and moral literacy is one of the best approaches in developing a tolerant worldview for our students. An integrated approach helps students understand the relevance of the text not only through analysis of the story line, but also through personal reflections on moral issues and the real meaning behind the story. Based on the work of Kirschenbaum (2000), Raths (2001) and Tuana (2007) and our classroom experiences we suggest the following explicit strategies for their implementation.

The first strategy we propose is outcomes matter. With this strategy, the teacher can choose to interrogate the text and ask students to think about the consequences of the action presented and make connections with their personal experiences. After an initial reading of the text, and the discussion that follows, students are asked to apply the newly developed
meaning to hypothetical situations in the future. They can be encouraged to reflect on what they have learned, how it relates to their personal experience, and thus begin to identify their personal values and values of others. Teachers need to ensure that a variety of print and digital texts are used and that students are exposed to both. Kubey (2002) argues that there are some tensions over what kinds of texts are legitimate objects of study - those valued by teachers or those valued by students. We propose that the text needs to be negotiated between the teacher and students, but the teacher needs to possess a repertoire of appropriate literature that presents a moral dilemma with enough substance to help students broaden their moral understanding (Luke, 2002; Peterson & Swartz, 2008; Raths, 2001). An additional textual source may include different popular magazines, websites or lyrics of popular songs for children and teens. The reflective activities that we propose can be accomplished either in written or oral form, in a group or on an individual basis.

The second strategy we propose is differences matter. With this strategy, teachers acknowledge that there are differences behind the meaning of specific terms for different individuals (Kirschenbaum, 2000; Tuana, 2007). The teacher may ask students to discuss the meaning of the word equality and guide them to realize that they are not necessarily in agreement when they deconstruct the meaning of the word. During the discussion, the teacher should present a visual collection of all the ideas so students can identify connections or inconsistencies and negotiate a common understanding. With this strategy, teachers guide students to understand the complexity of cultural, social and personal differences that influence their understanding of certain moral issues. This strategy would be particularly useful in contemporary multicultural classrooms where children from different cultural backgrounds can share their personal experiences around those issues.

The third strategy is interrelated goods. An important skill that students need to develop through critical and moral literacy is the ability to understand the relationship among the common good, the good of others, and the individual good. With this strategy, the teacher offers different moral dilemmas using case studies or role playing that could be based on their personal conflicts in or out of school. Then the teacher can ask students to discuss their own good based on their personal needs and aspirations, and the common good based on the good of the group or society (Luke, 2002; Raths, 2001; Tuana, 2007). Like the rotation of a kaleidoscope, teachers should ensure that each perspective receives a complete and adequate description. This type of discussion helps students to realize that there are instances when the common good or the good of others is more important than the individual good. In this way, they are more likely to develop sensitivity to the views, experiences, and culture of others.

The last strategy is fundamental goods. This strategy provides students with the opportunity to learn, understand, and deconstruct the meaning behind the fundamental human rights of our country. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees our fundamental freedoms (such as freedom of thought, speech, and association), democratic rights (such as the right to vote), mobility rights (the right to enter, remain in, and leave Canada), legal rights, equality rights (equality before the law and protection against discrimination), language rights, as well as the rights of Canada’s aboriginal peoples. Teachers and students can choose different historical texts, discuss the context and deconstruct the messages behind these events that led to the constitution and the recognition of human rights (Barton,
A role play can be employed in this context as well. In this way, moral and critical literacy serve as a tool for understanding the real meaning behind democracy and democratic citizenry. The proposed strategies are not intended to be exhaustive but are merely examples of possible methods than can integrate critical and moral literacy.

**Conclusion**

We know that children build an understanding of themselves as literate beings through social interaction (Barton, 2001; Fairclough, 2003). They also understand that they are individuals whose opinions and interpretations of text are unique and should be equally respected. Teachers have a responsibility to create an environment that will provide an opportunity for their students to engage in such literary interactions.

In conclusion, we firmly believe it is imperative that character education be included in our schools but not as a stand alone program. Rather, it should integrate moral and critical literacy to empower students to engage in critical dialogue which will enable them to examine their own beliefs and values and to further develop their critical and moral understanding. We do not want to underestimate the challenges that teachers face in the demanding task of preparing students for basic literacy skills necessary for standardized testing. What we are suggesting though, is that teachers can deepen students’ comprehension of text and at the same time implement strategies that will enhance the development of critical and moral literacy. In this context students should be able to master both, the skills necessary for the standardized testing as well as developing the skills to become democratic citizens of the world.

**References**


