The education students deserve: Building a democratic classroom in teacher education

Lina Bell Soares
Georgia Southern University

Abstract

The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in the United States, was initially lauded as a means to reform US public schools and bring about educational equality by raising the level of achievement for all students through strict assessment and accountability standards. In actuality, the preoccupation of raising test scores has become the classroom norm and meaningful curriculum that embodies authentic learning experiences to enhance a democratic way of life has given way to only content that is tested. From this author’s perspective, the practice of democracy must begin in the classroom. Our instructional sites are the perfect venue to give students voice, to teach acceptance, and to model fair and equitable treatment for all. As a means to foster democratic practices, this paper offers a framework used to prepare preservice middle grade teachers to create a more social justice-oriented curriculum through an integration of young adult literature and critical literacy. The framework is adapted from Ciardiello’s (2004) themes to promote critical literacy and includes: examining multiple perspectives, finding an authentic voice, recognizing social barriers, and finding one’s identity.

Introduction

In 1916, Dewey postulated that democratic schools provide the foundation for students to actively participate in a democratic way of life, and to do so, the educational curriculum must be structured to engage students in authentic real-life experiences that will empower them to maintain such a way of life beyond schools’ walls. Yet, scholars who have studied through varied theoretical lens (Apple & Beane, 2007; Giroux, 1988, 1989; Goodlad, 1984; Greene, 2000; Meier, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Ravitch, 2010) assert that US public schools today are more concerned about the production of proficient test scores on state-mandated standardized tests than putting democracy into practice. Further, the consensus among these scholars is that the culture of high-stakes testing in which public schools now function under the guise of educational reform has led the US school system into troubled times and far removed from democratic ideals. In the name of reform, one wonders if this is what Dewey envisioned for democratic schools; equality achieved through a single test score.

Kahne and Middaugh (2006) maintain that participation in democracy “does not occur instinctively nor does it develop organically. Educators have a role to play – helping students in thinking carefully…” (p. 607). Correspondingly, teacher educators have a role to play – a role that permits preservice teachers to explore pedagogies that lead to a more social justice-oriented curriculum and develop dispositions to teach with tolerance. Further, teacher educators must empower their preservice teachers to become caring participants in their society. From this author’s perspective, a good place to begin is through the implementation of democratic practices in their teaching.

In an era of high-stakes testing in US schools, it becomes necessary to engage preservice teachers in critical conversations that will sharpen their sensibilities toward societal problems in their world and ultimately remove social inequities in their classrooms. A plethora of research
has found that young adult literature is a good source of critical engagement because of the many prominent themes that are integral parts of content areas, such as conflict, ethical dilemmas, gender and race issues, environmental, and even violence (Harper & Bean, 2007). Moreover, researchers have found that young adult literature provides a vehicle to support critical literacy in the classroom (Bean & Harper, 2006; Bean & Moni, 2003; Behrman, 2006; Wolk, 2009). For certification seeking teachers in middle grade education, the adoption of strategic practices in critical literacy to enable discussions that center on relevant themes in the lives of young adolescents is essential to their development for future democratic classrooms. In conjunction, the adoption of a more social justice-oriented curriculum is crucial for teacher candidates in today’s diverse society.

Drawing on Dewey (1916, 1938) and on literature related to social justice and critical multicultural education (Banks, 2004; Giroux, 1989; May & Sleeter, 2010; Sleeter, 2005), in this article, I present a framework of instructional practices I use to prepare my preservice middle grade teachers to challenge the status quo (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993) and teach for social change through an integration of young adult literature and critical literacy. I begin by offering reasons to examine controversial issues found in young adult literature, followed by a brief account of critical literacy, both the concept and pedagogy. Subsequently, I introduce a framework of critical literacy practices to establish a social justice-oriented curriculum. My purpose is twofold: 1) to teach middle grade preservice teachers how to establish a participatory democracy in their future classrooms; and 2) to prepare middle grade preservice teachers to foster fairness and justice with the lives they will one day influence.

Reasons to Teach Young Adult Literature
For diverse US classrooms, teacher educators who work with content area preservice teachers in middle grade education must do more than teach content knowledge and instructional methods. In addition, we must introduce our students to the types of experiences that lead to critical conversations about current social and controversial issues that are relevant to content studies. One method that holds promise is to expose preservice teachers in middle grade education to challenging and contentious themes in young adult literature (Walker & Bean, 2005). By integrating young adult literature into preservice teachers’ development, they are given the opportunity to become part of a larger discussion that lays the foundation for caring, respectful, tolerant, and empathetic classrooms (Bean & Harper, 2004; Harper & Bean, 2007). In fact, Busching and Slesinger (2002) explicate that literature is the vehicle by which students can explore their world by focusing on issues and concerns, such as identity, discrimination, sexuality, environmental issues, and war and violence. Furthermore, McDaniel (2004) posits that when preservice teachers read and experience the controversial topics explored in diverse texts, they become aware of the injustices in the textual world, the real world, and work toward changing their world to benefit mankind. Yet for preservice teachers to be sufficiently prepared to create a democratic classroom, they must adopt a questioning stance that can be achieved through the pedagogy of critical literacy.

Critical Literacy: The Concept and Pedagogical Practices
Experts in the field of reading agree that one salient aspect of reader response is to connect students’ life experiences to texts (Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008; Rosenblatt, 1994; Sandman & Gruhler, 2007). However, response to literature requires connections beyond personal experiences. Critical literacy builds a foundation for students to engage in reader response activities that require them to read, analyze, question, and challenge all forms of text (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). It is an active approach to reading that focuses on issues of power and social inequality. Teachers who practice critical literacy engage their students in various activities designed to give them opportunities to interrogate texts (Luke & Freebody,
1997), view multiple perspectives, create alternative versions of reality (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000), and then take action to put the new versions of reality into effect (Behrman, 2006). Accordingly, readers are taught to question authors’ assumptions and beliefs, to question the voices heard and the voices that are silenced, and to find alternatives ways to improve their world (Au, 2009; Banks, 2004; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Sleeter, 2005). In doing so, preservice teachers come to know the fundamentals that promote a true democratic, participatory experience.

**A Framework to Promote Democracy in the Classroom**

As a professor of teacher education in the US, I want my preservice teachers to do more than demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective teaching. I want my students to restructure their curriculum and adopt pedagogy to foster fairness and create a democratic classroom culture of acceptance. From this perspective, I present a framework of four themes I have adapted from Ciardiello (2004): examining multiple perspectives, finding an authentic voice, recognizing social barriers, and finding one’s identity to promote a participatory democratic classroom. It is important to note that Ciardiello’s original framework includes a fifth theme – the call to service that provides an excellent foundation for service learning/civic engagement projects. For purposes of this paper, I present each of the four themes in the context of young adult literature and critical literacy practices that I use with my preservice teachers.

*I. Examining multiple perspectives*

The theme of multiple perspectives is an important aspect of critical literacy because it teaches students that texts can have multiple meanings based on various viewpoints, beliefs, and values. The goal for classroom teachers is to help their students see that no single version tells the story (Au, 2009). There are always gaps and silences (Fairclough, 1989), as well as contradictions in telling the story. To introduce this important aspect of critical literacy, I engage my students in discussions that center on personal events, such as family disagreements or conflicts that may have occurred with professors and grades. I then have my students examine the power differential in each of the scenarios and to reflect on whose voices seemed to dominate the discussions, or whose voices were discounted or ignored. More importantly, I ask them to reflect on how they felt if perhaps the voice that had been marginalized or silenced had belonged to one of them, and I ask them if they had ever thought to question why. My goal is to raise their critical awareness by teaching them to question why their perspective was silenced, what role did power play, what affect did power have on their perspective, and what action could they have taken to change the outcome (Bean & Moni, 2003). By using questions such as these, Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) would posit that I am purposely teaching my students to “question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice…” (p. 3). On a broader scale, I am providing the foundation for my students to begin to view the classroom as a society from which dialogue creates a space for constructing critical conversations about issues of social injustice.

Because critical literacy is about interrogating text and engaging in multiple perspectives, we examine many silenced voices – the silenced voices of fear, prejudice, gender bias, and discrimination that work to create the social injustices that are part of their world, and the world for many of today’s students. To achieve this objective, I encourage my students to explore the viewpoints that are not heard through young adult literature in order for my students to understand that power and perspective can marginalize or even silence voices that represent a
different perspective in every story. For example, I have found that *Day of Tears* by Julius Lester (2005) is an excellent reading source to engage my developing teachers in critical conversations regarding different viewpoints and perspectives. The book is based on the largest slave auction in Savannah, Georgia in 1859 and is a moving story told through many dialogues and monologues from the perspective of the slaves, the slave owners, and the auctioneer.

Despite the pervasive racism throughout the story, the book is an excellent representation of the many voices needed to tell one of the darkest chapters in American history. The social inequities found in *Day of Tears* (Lester, 2005) provide the opportunity for preservice teachers to experience deeper thinking, such as power domination and silenced voices, while building social awareness and tolerance. By examining the feelings and identities of characters who have been ignored and whose lives have been marginalized, oppressed, or perceived to be inferior from the mainstream norm, they learn to appreciate the lives of others in their world who might otherwise be ignored (Gay, 2002). Furthermore, preservice teachers learn the value in creating a classroom culture that represents a multiplicity of perspectives so that every student is acknowledged as a vital member of the learning community (Sergiovanni, 2005).

II. Finding Authentic Voice
Ciardiello (2004) tells readers that the theme of finding one’s authentic voice in critical literacy is closely connected to the theme of multiple perspectives. In other words, as students learn that texts often silence alternative perspectives, then students begin to understand there are voices missing behind those silenced perspectives. Critical literacy is a pedagogical tool that can encourage students to question issues of power and to challenge the forces that shape inequality and oppression in their world (Beck, 2005). Shor and Pari (1999) offer:

> Critical literacy thus challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for social and self-development. This kind of literacy – words rethinking worlds, self dissenting in society – connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for reinventing our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity. (p. 1)

For young adolescents to use their “words to rethink their worlds,” it is important that preservice middle grade teachers understand the power of dialogue and the need to create experiences whereby their future students can interrogate societal issues and attempt to solve social injustices in their world. To assist my developing teachers, I engage my students in reading texts that address issues of democracy, freedom, equity, and social justice, whereby critical conversations about silenced voices and marginalized groups can grow into sharper focus. I further develop lessons based on dialogue in order for my preservice teachers to participate in critical conversations that examine the injustices of privileging one group over another because of social status, race, ethnicity, and religion, and how membership in one cultural group often defines opportunities or a lack thereof. While reading, I ask them to question whose voices are heard, whose voices are missing, why the author chose to favor or reject some characters, and how could they change the social conditions to give voice to the voiceless (Bean & Moni, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). These crucial conversations provide opportunities for my developing teachers to assume a critical stance, discover their voices, and more importantly, to foster a critical pedagogy that will help give voice to their future students’ lives.

One piece of young adult literature that I use is *Night* by Elie Wiesel (2006). The memoir is an intensely terrifying account of the brutality, the loss of family members, and the inhumane treatment of Jews the author witnessed during his time in Hitler’s death camps. The book is an incredible story because Wiesel vowed he would never revisit the personal horror. However, with encouragement from a French humanitarian, he finally broke his silence and wrote the story to speak for the six million Jews who will never speak again. A second good source of
young adult literature I use to teach the concept of voice is *Speak* (Anderson, 1999). The story revolves around the life of Melinda Sordino who is an outcast in her high school for calling the police on a summer party that turned ugly. She lives with a horrible secret that she was raped during the party and cannot bring herself to speak about the trauma with her family or friends. Through her love for art, she eventually regains her voice and confronts her attacker. Melinda’s silence is a significant reminder of the shame and emotional paralysis that many students experience at the hands of other students and who withdraw from life because of oppressive forces surrounding them.

After reading, my students have rewritten parts of both texts through their own voices to record their feelings of desperation, isolation, and the belief that no one would listen. Additionally, they have been given the option to share their lived experiences aloud about times of personal pain. At times, I have invited my students to write song lyrics on important issues and themes in each novel to highlight their own unique voices. At times, I have my students develop interviews with a partner, one as the main character and one as the interviewer, to give the main character a voice to discuss lived experiences with someone who would listen.

Giroux (1989) explicated that “language is inseparable from lived experience and from how people create a distinctive voice” (p. 116). With each selection of young adult literature I use with my preservice students, the goal is to teach my students that the concept of voice is closely linked to everyday lived experiences. Therefore, if lived experiences are not free to be spoken, then student voices can be silenced. By reading young adult literature, preservice middle grade teachers begin to understand the forces in society that often work to marginalize and silence some members of society. The aim is for my preservice teachers to become more sensitive to what marginalized members of society have experienced and to understand the need to create a language of possibility (Giroux, 1997) for their future students.

III. Recognizing Social Barriers
Kornfeld and Prothro (2005), state that a classroom should be a “realm of possibility—a place in which teachers and students together examine their lived experiences and envision ways to enhance their lives and sense of efficacy in the world around them” (pp. 218-219). To be open to possibility, a classroom should be a positive learning community where all students are valued, supported, and feel a sense of belonging (Levine, 2003). Similarly, a positive learning community promotes a culture where students are free from discrimination, ridicule, or exclusion. Ciardiello’s (2004) third theme recognizes that harmful assumptions, negative stereotypes, and hurtful labels build social barriers that are divisive and counterintuitive to building a positive classroom culture. The theme of recognizing social barriers calls on teachers to bring young adolescents together by knocking down walls that separate, creating learning spaces where students can present different beliefs, values, and perspectives, and nurturing respect as caring participants in democracy.

To expand on the importance of this theme, I introduce my students to young adult literature that intentionally demonstrates how acceptance is often determined by cultural, ethnic, or class privilege. Our focus is to examine how prejudice is enacted by the dominant group. One piece of young adult literature that I frequently use is *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967). The story is told through the character of Ponyboy Curtis who lives with his older brothers due to the death of his parents. Throughout the novel, Ponyboy is confronted by class warfare and caught up in the bitter rivalry between the Greasers and the Socs, the nickname for Social. As a member of the Greasers, he continually faces walls of separation because of his lower social status until he is befriended by Cherry, a Soc. Through their friendship, the two teenagers realize they share many of the same dreams and fears that life can bring. Moreover, Pony Boy and Cherry portray
two adolescents who let go of their misconceptions and unjust social assumptions by allowing their friendship to knock down the class barriers that segregated their lives.

For additional sources of reading, my students and I have read *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991) which is a story of Esperanza Cordero’s life in the Latino quarter of Chicago. The book is an excellent example of how one family is relegated to a life of exclusion and lower class status because they do not speak English. To examine a similar theme of exclusion, we read *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000) which is a story of a young Mexican girl whose life is shattered when her father is killed. Esperanza and her mother flee to a migrant work camp in California during the Great Depression and begin a life of poverty, fear, and living with the stigma of an undocumented worker.

Both reading selections provide my students with a glimpse of what it is like to be viewed as an outsider from the dominant perspective where power and social status determine sociological categories of sub-dominant and marginal groups. Moreover, both books illustrate the barriers of separation from life’s opportunities due to language and cultural differences that many outsiders face. Through meaningful interactions with young adult literature, my preservice teachers can begin to understand the need to promote social action and knock down the walls that form barriers to learning in a democratic classroom.

**IV. Regaining One’s Identity**

Gee (2002) offered that identity is shaped in a situated context whereby individuals manifest certain beliefs, values, and behaviors in order to be a member of a social group. Unfortunately for many of today’s young adolescents in middle grade classrooms, they struggle to form their true identities. Separated by differences in language, ethnicity, culture, and social status from the mainstream norm, many students are often marginalized in a classroom society (Gay, 2002). Nevertheless, Bishop’s (1992) seminal study offered that literature can do more; “literature can act as a mechanism for the discussion and social transaction that will affect how children think about the world and children’s response to literature can either validate or challenge their own ideology and world view” (p. 43). From this stance, I view young adult literature to be an agent of socialization; it is a mechanism whereby my preservice teachers can examine their implicit beliefs, attitudes, and identities while developing the knowledge of what a more just society would look like. The goal is for my preservice teachers to understand that a learning context is a society. Moreover, it must be an environment of trust that encourages adolescent identity development by signifying that each student is a significant and valued member of the classroom society.

To introduce the theme of identity, I often read aloud to my students the *Falcon and Frog: A Story of Flight from Identity and Return to Self* by Shahidi (2009). It is a delightful children’s book that tells the story of how two friends help each other have the courage to be themselves and regain their identities. The message conveyed in this book is the importance of being true to oneself. The two characters in the story typify how acceptance or a lack thereof is often determined by social privilege and how prejudice is enacted by the dominant group because the two characters are judged not for whom they were on the inside, but by their outward appearance.

Before moving onto our text for this theme, I allow time for my students to share their stories when they have been the subject of others’ ridicule or to recount times when they have observed others who were bullied because they were different and judged to be inferior by the dominant group. Through our discussions, we address the many sides of prejudice and the harmful effects to people’s sense of selves. We then turn to our literature to read about an
identity in conflict and how the conflict shapes the perception of self. *Monster* (Myers, 1999) is an excellent source to introduce my preservice teachers to the concept of identity and the struggle to regain one’s true self. The main character, Steve Harmon, has been arrested and is on trial for the murder of a Harlem store owner. In this story, Steve is found guilty by association and is accused of aiding and abetting the real murderer. As the story unfolds, Steve develops a screenplay based on his time in prison and the courtroom in an attempt to come to grips with his portrayal as a monster. He is eventually set free and lives by a new code of conduct.

From reading *Monster* (Myer, 1999), my preservice teachers gain a better understanding of how characters in conflict, struggle with their identities when their world is turned upside down (Harper & Bean, 2007). Young adult literature allows my students the opportunity to analyze their sense of selves within their world and examine the concept of identity by interpreting others’ actions and practices (Hagood, 2002). In essence, they learn the importance of identity to a democratic classroom society they will one day create.

Returning to Dewey

More than seventy-five years ago, Dewey (1938) wrote, “[it is] the total social set-up of the situations in which a person is engaged that is most important in interpreting his or her experiences” (p. 45). Today, those experiences have been narrowed by a classroom culture of high-stakes standardized testing in the US and have unfortunate implications in public middle school classrooms. Middle grade classroom teachers and students alike are trapped in a curriculum of anti-democratic practices. The preoccupation of raising test scores is the norm for the classroom day and meaningful curriculum that embodies authentic learning experiences to enhance a democratic way of life has given way to only content that is tested. Yet, transformation of the classroom world does not occur overnight. It requires an active commitment to challenge and disrupt the commonplace activities and curricular structures that are firmly entrenched in today’s schools that deny students from educational opportunities and social equality. From this perspective, those of us in teacher education in the US are on the frontline to enact real change and we can begin by asking ourselves: Is this the education students deserve?

References


