FIRST STEPS IN CRITICAL LITERACY

A Chapter Style Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education-Professional Development

Scott T. Swedeen

College of Liberal Studies
School of Education

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FIRST STEPS IN CRITICAL LITERACY

By Scott Swedeen

We recommend acceptance of this thesis in partial fulfillment of the candidate's requirements for the degree of Master of Education Professional Development Initial Certification.

The candidate has completed the oral defense of the thesis.

Gary L. Willhite, Ph.D.
Thesis Committee Chairperson

Rita Chen, Ph.D.
Thesis Committee Member

Joyce Shanks, Ph.D.
Thesis Committee Member

Thesis accepted

Vijendra K. Agarwal, Ph.D.
Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

This thesis study examines the experience of a class of teacher education students learning about and working with critical literacy. The study specifically focuses on students’ attitudes towards critical literacy and their ability to put critical literacy into practice through the creation of literacy thematic units examining social issues. Data was collected through administering a survey to the whole class, examining a random sample of developed thematic units for evidence of critical literacy practice, and analyzing a random sample of responses to reflective questions for common themes in the students’ experience with critical literacy. Results indicated that, while the students felt positive towards critical literacy, they were unable to create lessons that contained critical literacy practice. The study suggests that the students were not prepared to critically examine the social issues under study, and were therefore not able to create authentically critical lessons. Preparing teacher education students to become critical educators may require more than introducing critical methodologies; it may require a rethinking of teacher education programs.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

For a nation founded upon egalitarian ideals, the United States has rarely put those ideals into practice. From the ending of slavery, to women's suffrage, to the modern civil rights movement, marginalized populations have struggled against oppression to gain basic civil rights. While many groups no longer face de jure discrimination, de facto inequalities still persist. Median family incomes of whites tend to be substantially higher than those of blacks and Latinos (Shor, 2009). Blacks face higher levels of unemployment than whites, even among populations with similar levels of educational attainment. Women continue to earn less money than their male counterparts. Hunger persists in the United States, especially among seniors and children (Lieberman, 2003). Income inequality has actually grown, with the top 1 percent of earners taking home a massive 23.5 percent of the nation’s income in 2007, up from only 9 percent in 1976 (Rich, 2010). During this same period, the median income for nonelderly U.S. households declined while poverty rates rose.

The contradiction between the ideal of equality and the reality of inequality is mirrored in our nation’s schools. Horace Mann advocated for public education in the nineteenth century out of concern that inequities in education could lead to the development of intellectual castes and growing class divisions, and that public education could have a leveling effect and educate a broad citizenry to become productive members
of society (Williams, 1937). In reality though, public education was initially denied to women and African Americans (Shor, 2009). While public education is now ostensibly provided for all children in the United States (leaving aside debates about whether the children of undocumented immigrants should be allowed to attend public schools), inequities in the education received by these children persist. Schools minority and low-socioeconomic status students attend often receive far less funding than the children of white, well-off communities (Kozol, 1991; Shor, 2009). Students in urban and rural areas must often contend with inadequate facilities and substandard education.

Unequal education plays out in dramatically different results. The gains in test scores of black students in the 1970s and 1980s have slowed due to public policies that have exacerbated inequity in public schooling (Shor, 2009). Graduation rates for blacks, Latinas/os, and Native Americans continue to lag well behind those of white students; few of those who do graduate from high school attend college, with even fewer actually attaining a degree in higher education (Gose, 1998; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). Public education, as it is currently constructed, fails to deliver on the goal of creating equal opportunity for all students.

Beyond creating equal opportunities for success, public education was also conceived as a preparation for a vibrant, democratic citizenry capable of functioning in a republic (Shor, 1987). Yet, the traditional practice of education in the United States tends to subvert the goal of creating a democratic citizenry. School practices are apt to silence student voices rather than encourage democratic participation (Fine, 1987; Peterson, 2009; Shor, 2009). Schools often distance themselves from students (especially students who are minorities or come from low-income families) by refusing to acknowledge the
material realities of these students’ lives that contradict meritocratic narratives. Rather than “name” the issues these students face, schools and administrators often act to “close” conversations on inequity and racism (Fine, 1987; Shor, 2009). Democratic participation in the classroom is often subverted by classroom management systems that locate sole authority and responsibility in the person of the teacher (Kohn, 2006). The drive for standardized testing and an increasingly centralized curriculum threatens to marginalize vital aspects of students’ lived realities and diverse experiences which are essential to creating educational experiences that are meaningful and relevant (Peterson, 2009). It is small wonder, then, that students who feel their lives and voices are irrelevant become increasingly withdrawn from or resistant to schooling (Shor, 1987).

The contradictory relationship between the ideals and realities of public education in the United States uncovers a disturbing problem with schooling in this country: it buttresses and replicates an unequal status quo. In the early twentieth century, John Dewey (1916) recognized that the children of the elite received better education and that educational institutions were perpetuating unequal class structures that he believed were harmful to a democratic society. While largely eschewing politics, Dewey advocated for high quality education for all students regardless of socioeconomic background (Shor, 2009). Other U.S. education reformers embraced a vision of education combining political and social critique. During the Great Depression, education reformists such as George Counts encouraged teachers to take an active role in building a better society through education and the incorporation of social justice themes in the curriculum (Kliebard, 1995). Despite a conservative backlash against the incorporation of social critique into the curriculum, critical and emancipatory ideals have continued to find
expression in the ideas of present day education theorists such as Henry Giroux, Jonathan 
Kozol, Herb Kohl, Michael Apple, Peter McLaren, Maxine Greene, and Ira Shor (Darder,  
Baltodano, & Torres, 2009a).

Much of this modern iteration of critical educational thought derives from the  
critical theories of the Frankfurt School, an institute of neo-Marxist thought established in  
1923 that included European thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and 
Herbert Marcuse (Darder et al., 2009a). These theorists challenged many of the  
traditional forms of rationality that define meaning, knowledge, and truth, recognizing  
that positivist conceptions of what it means “to know” something are profoundly  
impacted by the unequal social conditions of capitalist economies. Knowledge and  
meaning, then, are constructed within the context of history and society rather than  
objective truths waiting “out there” to be discovered. Since schools concern themselves  
with learning, educational institutions should be critiqued to uncover the ways in which  
certain forms of knowledge are legitimized or delegitimized in order to maintain the  
social structure of society (Giroux, 2009). Ultimately, schools reinforce what Antonio  
Gramsci and others call “hegemony,” the maintenance of social control not through force,  
but rather through the efforts of moral leaders in society to induce support for the ruling  
elite. In the case of schools, this takes place through the daily practices of schooling and  
the reinforcement of oppressive “truths” as common sense assumptions to be taken at  
face value (Darder et al., 2009a, p. 6).

The Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire examined exactly how these  
educational practices created this passivity in the face of oppression (Darder et al.,  
2009a). Freire felt that traditional educational practice, with the teacher dispensing
knowledge which students are expected to absorb inculcates passivity in these students' outlook on the world (Freire, 1970). Essentially, students experience a "hidden curriculum" in which they learn to depend on and not question authority. They do not see themselves as active agents in their own education and construction of understanding; they are deficient and dependent. Freire theorized that this carried over into students' lives in the larger social order, creating oppressed, dehumanized individuals unwilling or unable to recognize and take action against their oppressors. Only by creating the conditions in which the oppressed can come to recognize their oppression and ultimately their own agency in affecting change can a more just social order be built. In educational practice, this involves problematizing how students relate to their world and dialoguing about these problems mediated by the lived realities of these students' lives. This "problem-posing" education is a cooperation between the teacher and students, as the goal is for students to become active subjects in their education. Ultimately, students' scope of critical inquiry is widened, problems are seen in their wider context, and students begin to view themselves as capable of acting to change an oppressive reality.

The belief that American schools in many ways fail to provide equal opportunity to all students, that teachers have a role in creating a better society, that forms of knowledge are socially constructed to uphold an unjust, capitalist society, and that schools and educational practices are deeply implicated in the maintenance of an oppressive social are the foundational beliefs informing critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2009a). Critical pedagogy, like all knowledge, is shaped by the values and beliefs of each individual and therefore resists a simple definition, but here are some common elements of a pedagogy that is critical: it is grounded in a vision for a more just and
equitable society, that all education is political, that the curriculum should be rooted in students' lives, and that it is important to take action to resist injustice (Kinchenloe, 2008). Critical pedagogy can take many forms, but it has at its heart the connection of schooling to democratic principals and transformative action in the interest of combating oppression (Darder et al., 2009a, p. 2). A critical education, rather than train students in passivity in the face inequity, prepares students to become their own agents for social change and the building of a democratic polity (Shor, 1987).

Critical literacy is the application of the principles of critical pedagogy to literacy, language arts, and text interaction in the classroom (by text, the author means any type of communication—written, spoken, visual, verbal and nonverbal). Critical literacy pushes the boundaries of literacy work beyond functional literacy (decoding and encoding of words) and transactional literacy (affective reaction) to uncover and discuss how power relations and the assumptions of the dominant culture influence how meaning is constructed from a text (Creighton, 1997; Jewett, 2007; Simpson, 1996). Like all forms of knowledge, literacy is socially constructed within a political context where access to power is structured unequally (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). What counts as being "literate", and which forms of literacy are considered "appropriate" reflects the values of dominant groups within a society and furthers the interests of those dominant groups. From a critical perspective, literacy instruction that focuses purely on mechanics limits the ability of students to resist oppressive messages embedded in the texts they will encounter throughout their world (Kretovics, 1985; Shor, 1987). Limiting textual interaction to the affective reaction through transactional literacy ignores that our "feelings" are often situated within a particular social and historical situation that is
changeable (Jewett, 2007). Practitioners of critical literacy do not deny that these forms of literacy have an important role to play, rather they believe that denying the political aspect of language use denies students the opportunity to examine how texts are constructed within an unequal society in which some are privileged at the expense of others. Like knowledge, texts are also social constructs.

Like critical pedagogy, critical literacy resists simple definitions and explanations (Behrman, 2006). At a basic level, “…critical literacy creates spaces for students to tackle larger social issues that have urgent meaning in their lives” (Christensen, 2000, p. 112). Critical literacy helps students to identify how their lives are situated in the larger social context and how the lives of others are represented or misrepresented in various texts (Christensen, 2000). Within critical literacy practice, it is assumed that readers bring their own knowledge and world view to a text, that no text has a single, universal meaning or truth, and that student “voice” has the power to shape and mediate the reality of the text (Creighton, 1997). Critical literacy practice is resistant to becoming a set method, but in a review of the literature on critical literacy practices Behrman (2006) identifies six broad categories of critical literacy practice in the classroom: reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, producing countertexts, conducting student-choice research projects, and taking social action.

Within critical pedagogy and critical literacy, the teacher plays an important role. Freire (1970) recognized that the knowledge and direction of the teacher is essential in the creation of opportunities for students to critically engage with relevant social issues. The teacher occupies a unique position of being able to work as an oppressor or work
with students towards liberation. Because the conceptual knowledge of the teacher is valued in critical pedagogy, the teacher is a necessary component of the learning process (Shor, 2009). It is the teacher who acts as a gatekeeper to the histories, stories, experiences, and texts that gain entry to the classroom (Giroux, 1993). The teacher is given power. Does he or she use that power to empower students or to silence them? Does the teacher work in cooperation with students as subjects in their own learning, or does he or she view students as objects to be acted upon? In the microcosm of the classroom, the teacher is situated to create a learning environment that stimulates students to critique and take action to create a better society or to use oppressive teaching methods to reinforce the unequal, oppressive status quo. The teacher has the potential to work towards the promise of public education in the United States or to reproduce the social, political, economic, racial, and gender inequities that have resulted from the reality of our current educational system.

The journey towards becoming a critical educator must begin somewhere. The author comes to theories of critical pedagogy and critical literacy from a lifetime of affinity with left-wing political causes and is predisposed to viewing the classroom as a political nexus with great potential to transform how students view their world. But not all teachers come to education with such a highly charged political background. This research examined how a class of preservice teachers working towards certification to teach at the elementary level engaged with critical literacy in a foundational literacy course. It focused on critical literacy at the elementary level out of a belief that children at a young age have a strong sense of fairness, and that it is essential to provide
opportunities at a young age for students to critically engage with issues of fairness in their world (Hall, 1998).

These preservice teachers are at the early stages of becoming educators, and in all likelihood many are encountering critical literacy for the first time. Through their literacy course, they have engaged in readings and class discussions with their professor surveying basic elements and principles of critical literacy theory and practice. As part of their coursework, the students have developed a thematic unit dealing with a social issue in which they were asked to incorporate elements of critical literacy. To develop an understanding of their experience with critical literacy, the researcher:

- Surveyed student reactions to critical literacy to learn whether the class as a whole reacted positively or negatively to learning about critical literacy.
- Interpretively analyzed the preservice teachers' responses to reflective questions to identify common themes related to their experience with critical literacy.
- Reflectively analyzed the preservice teachers' thematic units for evidence of critical literacy practice based on common practices present in the professional literature on critical literacy.

This project surveys the attitudes and conceptions of preservice teachers towards critical literacy and assesses their ability to put critical literacy into practice through the creation of lesson plans. If critical education has the potential to truly transform education and society, it is essential that it move from the purely theoretical to concrete application. By examining the successes and limitations faced by students taking their first steps in critical literacy practice, one may understand the potentialities and problems faced in bringing critical literacy into pedagogical practice.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Literacy instruction that provides students the language, conceptual tools, and power to critique plays a central role in creating critical, emancipatory education (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009b). If language use is an element through which humans construct our social identity, students need a lens through which to read the texts that they encounter in and out of the school system (Jewett, 2007; Shor, 2009). Critical literacy can be conceived of as a lens through which students view texts as historically and socially constructed, embedded with power dynamics, and open to critique. A critical lens ultimately empowers students to develop counternarratives that further goals of social justice and ending oppression. Because language builds consciousness, creating a critical consciousness necessitates the incorporation of critical literacy practices as a component of education from the earliest levels (Hall, 1998). An understanding of critical literacy necessitates an examination of the principles that underlie it, as well as the practices of critical literacy classrooms.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical literacy can only be understood as part of the larger project of creating a critical pedagogy (Shor, 2009). Theories of critical pedagogy originate and draw inspiration from a diverse body of educational theorists, reformers, and practitioners.
Education Reformers in the United States

The thought of the early twentieth-century American philosopher and educator John Dewey impacted the development of progressive forms of education in significant ways (Darder et al., 2009, p. 3). Dewey critiqued traditional educational practices that divided intellectual and sensory learning (Posner, 2004). He believed that, in order to develop a well-rounded individual, learning needed to be based upon experiences that stimulated reflection and action, wedding intellectual and sensory learning. Education separated from either action or reflection was ultimately insufficient for learning in a democratic society that required fully developed individuals capable of exercising civic responsibility (Posner, 2004; Shor, 2009).

A social critique was embedded in Dewey’s criticisms of traditional educational practice. According to Dewey, the split between intellectual and sensory education was shaped by class interests, with the former reserved for the education of the elite and the latter serving the masses (Dewey, 1996). Dewey saw that the children of the non-elite received an inferior education deemphasizing development of the intellect in favor of occupational preparedness (Shor, 2009). Dewey felt this was problematic, as an inadequate, mechanistic education did not provide children the knowledge and reflective experience to make essential life-choices in a modern, democratic society (Dewey, 1996). While Dewey has been criticized for underestimating the larger sociopolitical, economic, and historical factors that give rise to inequity, his work is essential in linking the practice of schooling to a larger social outcome of producing a responsible, democratic citizenry (Darder et al., 2009, p. 3; McLaren, 1989).
While Dewey largely avoided politics, other education reformers in the United States sought to empower educators and schools to consider inequality and work to change social structures (Peterson, 2009; Kliebard, 1995). During the 1920s and into the Great Depression, George Counts was a central figure in the movement to utilize schools and education to combat and remedy social injustice in the capitalist system (Kliebard, 1995). Counts’ work in the 1920s demonstrated that, rather than creating new opportunities and building a better society, U.S. schools reflected and upheld a stratified and unequal social order (Kliebard, 1995, p. 160). In his most widely read work, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (1932), Counts takes the view that education does not take place in a vacuum, rather it occurs within the value systems of particular cultures. Counts also believed the act of education to be an imposition of ideas on another, so the challenge for teachers is whether the values imposed on students will be those of the ruling elite, determined to buttress a status quo, or whether teachers will mobilize educational institutions to combat social inequity (Counts, 1932; Kliebard, 1995). Because education involves the choice of which values to impose, it is a political act (Counts, 1932). Teachers cannot claim to be impartial, since they must either choose to teach the values of the dominant elite or teach to change the social order to one of greater justice.

While Counts’ ideas fell on fertile ground during the years of the Great Depression, with the impending onset of the Second World War, education for social change began to be seen as anti-American and harmful (Kliebard, 1995). Despite a conservative reaction, a vision of American schools working towards greater social justice did not disappear and in the 1960s and 1970s, sociological research in education
posed significant questions about how power, knowledge, and control challenged traditional conceptions of objectivity and neutrality (Kretovics, 1985, p. 51). With the fraying of the post-war consensus of the late 1940s and 1950s, inequity again became an important issue in American society and schools. Myles Horton’s Highlander Folk School embraced the political potential of schooling to train civil rights workers to defy segregation laws (Darder et al., 2009, p. 3). At the same time, Herbert Kohl’s Open School Movement worked to build connections between schools and communities while teaching for diverse populations (Darder et al., 2009). In the late 1960s, Jonathan Kozol began a long career exploring the material inequities and persistent segregation in U.S. schools. During the 1980s and 1990s, emancipatory education—or critical pedagogy as Henry Giroux termed it—continued to be explored and revitalized by numerous educational theorists such as Ira Shor, Peter McLaren, Michael Apple, Maxine Green, Michelle Fine, and others who embraced the potential of American schools to create a more equitable, democratic society.

**Critical Theory**

Much current thought in critical pedagogy has been shaped by critical social and political theory originating in Europe during the twentieth-century (Kretovics, 1985). In particular, the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, founded in the 1920s and popularly known as the Frankfurt School, stands as the seminal institution in the development of critical theories that have been particularly influential in the development of critical pedagogy (Kinchenloe, 2008; Kretovics, 1985). While drawing heavily on the thought of Marx, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Weber, the Frankfurt School critiqued the injustice and inequality present in capitalist society, while also
defying the dogmatism of orthodox Marxism (Darder et al., 2009; Kinchenloe, 2008, p. 46). Recognizing that Marx could not foresee social conditions in advanced-stage capitalist societies in the West, the Frankfurt School developed new theories of social critique that remained rooted in the Marxist criticism of capitalist economies (Darder et al., 2009).

The critical theory of members of the Frankfurt School such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse questioned predominant positivist conceptions of reason and objectivity in western society (Giroux, 2009). Post-Enlightenment thought, according to Marcuse (1964), was increasingly patterned upon inquiry into natural sciences in a drive for certainty and exactitude. This tendency reduces inquiry to description, classification, and generalization dependent solely on measure, sensory observation (Horkheimer, 1972). For the theorists of the Frankfurt School, this approach to knowledge precluded theory and critique arising out of theory as lesser forms of unquantifiable, “speculative” thought (Giroux, 2009). Furthermore, Horkheimer (1972) believed that positivist conceptions of knowledge are more valued in an oppressive, capitalist system, exactly because they relate purely to “what is” and how it can be replicated as opposed to “what could be” and how to realize that potential.

In contrast to positivism, the Frankfurt School viewed knowledge not as objective but as rooted in historical and social consciousness (Giroux, 2009). This is not to reject knowledge based on sense perception per se, rather the theorists of the Frankfurt School denied empiricism’s primacy over theory, thus acknowledging the framework theory offers to the creation and critique of knowledge. Theory provides a framework in which knowledge is given a larger meaning and purpose (Horkheimer, 1972). For the Frankfurt
School, this larger meaning is whether socially constructed knowledge advances human freedom as opposed to domination and oppression. Critical theory allows for the application of dialectical thought to commonplace assumptions about society to uncover insufficiencies within the assumptions; it uncovers how those in power deploy knowledge to dominate others (Giroux, 2009).

Mass-cultural institutions (such as schools), according the Frankfurt School, play an essential role in this process of using knowledge to dominate others (Giroux, 2009). Outside of the Frankfurt School, Italian communist thinker Antonio Gramsci theorized in the 1920s that these mass institutions helped perpetuate hegemony. Gramsci used the idea of hegemony to explain that the elites' domination of subalterns is not accomplished through brute force but through winning the social and psychological consent of the people to their own domination through the work of moral leaders in society, such as teachers, clerics, and the media (Kinchenloë, 2008, p. 54; Santucci, 2010). Gramsci (1992) argued that institutions, through the maintenance of norms of behavior and expectation, reinforce the interests of those in power. In schools, students can be socialized to support the interests of elites, even when those interests act in a contradictory way to the students' own interests. In this way, schools reproduce hegemony and inequity (Gramsci, 1992). The French philosopher Michel Foucault, though, critically pointed out that power does not reside solely in the act of domination (Darder et al., 2009). Power can also be found in acts of resistance to domination. In this conception, power is not solely top down, rather power can be also exerted by the oppressed through acts of resistance.
Freire

Paulo Freire examined just how pedagogical practices in schools served to further the domination of oppressed peoples, and how alternative pedagogies could foster greater consciousness of inequity and a desire to act for social change (Darder et al., 2009; Shor, 2009). A Brazilian educational theorist, Freire’s ideas on pedagogy and society arose from his experience of poverty in northeastern Brazil in the mid-twentieth century (Shaull, 2000). The silence of the poor and oppressed disturbed Freire. He located their unwillingness to protest their situation in the systemic inequities present in Brazil at the time. He implicated the nation’s schools in producing this passivity (Shaull, 2000, p. 30). In response to his successful literacy campaigns, the military government exiled Freire abroad where he further developed his educational theory, which became influential around the world. He returned to Brazil in 1980 and continued to work in education until his death in 1997.

Freire rejected traditional “banking” models of education (Freire, 1970). Banking education implies that students “receive” knowledge from their teachers, who “deposit” that knowledge into their students. Banking education turns students into objects, in which education is done to them, rather than with them (Freire, 1970). Freire felt that this education reinforces a fatalistic feeling in students that leads them to docility in the face of oppression. At its root, banking education trains one to accept one’s position in society, with a feeling of inability to challenge authority and oppression through a sense of one’s own utter inadequacy and dependence on that oppressive authority (Freire, 1970).
In contrast to banking models, Freire proposed dialogic, problem-posing education (Bartlett, 2005). Since for Freire all learning is relational, knowledge is produced when teachers and students discuss and debate, especially on social issues relevant to students’ lives. Problems are posed by the teacher or by the students, and in the process of purposeful, structured dialogue, answers are sought collaboratively (Peterson, 2009). Through open-ended questions, the teacher can help to prod students to critically examine their situation, become conscious of their ability to change it, and work to create a more just, equal society. To facilitate this, teachers and students should attempt to reduce the gulf between each other, with the teacher realizing he or she can learn from his or her students, and students realizing that knowledge is not something they passively receive from the teacher but something they take an active role in creating (Peterson, 2009; Shor, 2009). However, Freire acknowledged that the teacher, through knowledge and experience, does have a directive role in the classroom (Bartlett, 2005). The teacher should strive to ensure that this advantage the teacher possesses should be used in a cooperative rather than oppressive, antagonistic way.

Freire’s pedagogy is rooted in the “generative” themes of students’ lives. Generative themes are topics of study that pique the interest of students in a way that discussion, study, and action can be structured around the themes (Peterson, 2009, p. 307). These themes usually arise out of the material realities of students’ lives and communities, but may also be prominent topics in the media. In Freire’s conception, generative themes connect the act of education with the issues students face in their everyday life, unveiling how learning in school relates to and makes sense of students’ material realities (Kinchenloe, 2008).
Critical Pedagogical Practice

Teachers use critical pedagogy to liberate students, letting them break free from conceptions of objective knowledge that legitimize the unequal social order (Darder et al., 2009; Freire, 1970; Kinchenloe, 2008; Shor, 2009). While critical pedagogues resist set methods, Kinchenloe (2008) does identify some common elements of critical pedagogical practice. Critical pedagogy is rooted in a vision of a just and equitable society. This vision provides a framework and purpose for education to promote a better society. Having a forward-looking, visionary framework provides a key tool to analyze curricular and pedagogical choices to determine whether they work towards larger, socially progressive goals (Giroux, 2009; Kinchenloe, 2008). This is obviously an injection of politics into the classroom, but critical pedagogues believe that all education is a political act (Kinchenloe, 2008). Decisions about what is or what is not taught are always political, in that they encourage or discourage particular viewpoints (Apple, 1995). Often, these viewpoints privilege the dominant class and culture in a society. The label of “neutrality” often acts to mask curricula that do not challenge the status quo (Giroux, 1988). Curriculum must also be rooted in students’ lives (Kinchenloe, 2008). These are the generative themes explained in Freire’s work. Generative themes make schooling and critical education relevant to the real world concerns of students and their communities. Ultimately, critical pedagogy embraces not just reflection and critique, but also action to combat injustice. Reflection without action is ultimately meaningless (Freire, 1970). Being able to take what is learned and acting upon it is essential to developing a sense of agency and subjectivity in the world (Peterson, 2009; Shor, 1987).
Through critical pedagogical practices, educators bring to the classroom an awareness of the structure of socio-cultural systems, and of how positions of power within those systems affect groups in positive and negative ways (Creighton, 1997). As its aim, critical pedagogy seeks to create the conditions for greater social justice and equity in schools as well as the transformation of society at large into one characterized by greater democracy and equality (Darder et al., 2009).

**Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy is the application of critical pedagogy to the area of language instruction, literacy, and textual interaction throughout the curriculum (Behrman, 2006; Kretovics, 1985; Peterson, 2009; Shor, 2009). Literacy has many meanings depending on what is valued as being “literate” (Hall, 1998). A limited view of literacy, functional literacy, tends to be the most valued and prevalent form of literacy education in our schools (Kretovics, 1985). Functional literacy only goes as far as considering the language skills one needs to best ‘function’ with print, focusing on what is minimally necessary to cope with a print society (Hall, 1998; Kretovics, 1985). Functional literacy does not tend to value discussion and reflection on what is being read, instead it is focused largely on the “basic” skills necessary to carry out the act of decoding or encoding language (Peterson, 2009). While these are necessary skills, literacy instruction that goes no further than acquisition of basic skills does not support students’ growth and deeper interaction with a text (Shor, 1987). Lankshear and Lawler (1987) assert that functional literacy alone leads to a consciousness that accepts subordination and hegemony. Students who are unable to move beyond basic comprehension of a text
never consider how the text positions them to think in ways that ultimately are disempowering.

On another level, there is transactional literacy. In transactional literacy, readers take meaning from a text based on their experiences and knowledge of the world (Rosenblatt, 1978). Readers take a position, or 'stance', to their reading. There are two essential stances. In the efferent stance, a reader seeks specific information within the text, searching for relevant concepts at the moment. In the aesthetic stance, the reader is focused on the personal meaning or pleasure he or she draws from the text. Transactional literacy respects the individuality of the reader, viewing the experiences of the reader as the only available 'filter' through which he or she can understand a text (Jewett, 2007). However, transactional literacy theory can also be criticized for ignoring the socially and historically constructed nature of even personal knowledge derived from experiences. It can also be criticized for creating a 'mystique of authorship', in which the reader ultimately accepts what an author says as a product solely of the author's creativity and vision without subjecting it to a critical analysis related to power relationships resulting from social and historical factors (Gilbert, 1994).

Critical literacy seeks to move beyond the limitations of functional and transactional literacies. It is not meant to be the sole form of literacy, as functional and transactional literacy are important (Hall, 1998). Critical literacy supplements other forms of literacy by considering the socially constructed nature of knowledge and experience as expressed in written and spoken language (Hall, 1998, p. 185). If literacy is understood as a social act that participates in the construction of the individual in the larger culture, learning to read and to write should take into consideration how
consciousness is shaped by history, society, culture, and power relations (Anderson & Irvine, 1993; Shor, 2009). In the context of critical pedagogy, critical literacy provides students with the concepts and skills necessary to critique and envision a better society (Kretovics, 1985).

Critical literacy, by asking students to delve beneath the surface of a text and interrogate ulterior motives present in the text, helps them to become critically competent (Ciardiello, 2004). Students become aware of how a text communicates messages about power, race, and gender, as well as who is privileged and who is oppressed and why (Hall & Piazza, 2008). They come to an understanding of how their privileged or oppressed social background of both informs their interpretation of a text, and how they are being "positioned" to read a text a certain way, and how they have power to position others in relation to a text (Hall & Piazza, 2008; Lobron & Selman, 2007). In contrast to the "filter" of transactional literacy, by which textual information is filtered through the students' experiences and beliefs uncritically, critical literacy provides students a "lens" through which they can analyze a text in its social and historical context related to power relations and how the experience with power in their lives impacts their interpretation of a text (Jewett, 2007). From this basis, students can begin to deconstruct texts, see how knowledge is socially constructed, that the "truth" of a text is relative, and begin to deploy a reading of a text that does not uncritically digest messages embedded within the text (Behrman, 2006).
Critical Literacy Practice in the Elementary Classroom

Appropriateness

If critical literacy is a deeper form of literacy, at what point should it become part of literacy instruction? Hall (1998) suggests that critical literacy should be an element of literacy education from an early age. Literacy and consciousness are in a dialectical relationship, with literacy practices impacting the development of consciousness and consciousness affecting one’s literacy (Hall, 1998, p. 188). Since language and consciousness formation powerfully impact one another, exposure to and practice with critical literacy should begin early in schooling if one hopes to develop critical habits of mind (Hall, 1998). Students need opportunities to deploy textual analysis in a critical way in order to develop these skills and concepts.

While students should learn to examine texts from a critical perspective, can young students comprehend issues of inequality and injustice? Some educators find topics like democracy and social justice too abstract for young students, but Hall (1998) argues that young students are able to relate to issues of fairness, as these issues are within the range of their experiences. Hall argues that it is essential for these students to be able to ‘name’ and have access to language addressing unfairness and inequality. Ciardiello (2004) concludes that young students are able to investigate social justice issues and act as democratic ‘agents’ especially through embodying abstract concepts in a personal way, thus relating these concepts to lived experiences of students (Ciardiello, 2004). The evidence that students are aware of certain privileged categories that are considered the ‘norm’ (such as “Whiteness”) by fourth and fifth grade, but are also able
to critique those norms testifies to their ability to engage in critical literacy practices (Yeoman, 1995).

**Critical Literacy Classroom**

While theorists and practitioners of critical literacy tend to resist being limited to a set “method,” they do outline qualities of a classroom that values critical pedagogy and critical literacy (Behrman, 2006; Jewett, 2007). The creation of a classroom that values critical literacy must empower students, while still creating an atmosphere where responsibility is encouraged (Behrman, 2006; Peterson, 2009). In a critical literacy classroom, the knowledge and authority of a teacher promotes student agency (Shor, 2009). Freire recognizes that the teacher can and should take a directive role in the classroom, within the framework of wanting to create mutuality and cooperation with students (Shor & Freire, 1987). Building a classroom that empowers students requires building up their self-esteem and responsibility through:

1. Student involvement in rule-making
2. Modeling and discussing time management and organization
3. Organization of the classroom environment—creating the ideal space for different activities (group work, lecture, etc.)
4. Frequent class meetings
5. Opportunities for students to dialogue and get to know each other

The ultimate goal of these activities is to allow students to become responsible subjects in their own education. It is an attempt to move beyond teacher- or textbook-centered
"banking" education that denies students a role as responsible agents in their education (Peterson, 2009). When students are given responsibility—made subjects of their education—they can better see themselves as subjects in their world, capable of engaging in activity to create change (Freire, 1970). Peterson (2009) cautions that this is not without struggle. Many students see empowerment in the classroom as license to act irresponsibly, and freedoms may need to be curtailed if they are not handled with responsibility.

Peterson (2009) also proposes that teaching be centered on generative themes—utilizing words and language that draw on the backgrounds and experiences of students, and often lead into topics that deal with fairness, equality, and injustice. This is done in conjunction with “bringing the world into the classroom”, connecting issues in the outside world with the generative themes in students’ lives (Peterson, 2009, p. 309). Using generative themes connects community and school, but also connects students with the world around them, encouraging students to reflect on their own lives and open up conversations about how power and institutions impact and shape them (Peterson, 2009).

Besides student empowerment and centering the curriculum on themes of interest and relevancy to students’ lives, there are other elements that go into the creation of classrooms conducive to critical literacy. In a study of how teachers might encourage students to develop critical literacy, Hall and Piazza (2008) found four suggestions teachers who practiced critical literacy identified as essential principles of critical literacy practice. Teachers felt that they needed to start by understanding their own biases and beliefs. Without these understandings, teachers felt they would be more susceptible to promoting their own stereotypes and ideas even while attempting to encourage students
to become more critical. From a position of understanding their own biases, teachers should then come to understand their students' views on literacy and the world. Understanding that students may have a limited view of the purpose of reading allows the teacher to begin steering student understanding of purposeful reading in new directions. Teachers also felt that they needed to make issues of power central by utilizing texts to help students understand and question how power is deployed in society and the classroom to privilege some social groups and oppress others. Finally, teachers felt that they needed to move beyond multicultural “snippets”, specifically utilizing multicultural texts in a way that presents other cultures as more than just sociological/historical/anthropological “facts.” Multicultural texts needed to be used in ways that helped students to question their own beliefs about society and power (Hall & Piazza, 2008).

**Critical Questions**

In critical literacy practice, it is essential to structure the inquiry and analysis of a text in a critical way. Teachers need to support students and guide them in the process of critically questioning a text (Lobron & Selman, 2007). In a study of the responses of three African-American boys to texts dealing with masculinity, power, and bullying, Hall and Piazza (2008) discovered that the boys frequently interpreted the texts in light of their own acceptance of power being used against others. Texts that attempted to reframe issues of bullying and masculinity were dismissed as not adequately representing what the boys perceived as reality. In a study of girls’ responses to a book meant to give an alternative to stereotypes about femininity, Wason-Ellam (1997) found that girls resisted
these messages, interpreting the books in ways that reinforced views of women that were negative.

Readers do not necessarily absorb a progressive message from a text, but need to be guided to approach a text critically (Wason-Ellam, 1997). Peterson’s (2009) model of critically questioning a text was created in light of Freire’s idea of dialogic instruction. Freire’s “dialogue” is more than just open discussion. It is a focused and purposeful discussion that seeks to demonstrate that an object of study is not the intellectual property of the teacher that students are expected to absorb. Rather, students are capable of generating knowledge through reflection and dialogue in cooperation with the teacher.

To generate dialogue and discussion, Peterson uses ‘triggers’, ranging from prose, poetry, and oral stories to drawings, cartoons, and photos, and then uses the SHOWED acronym to structure discussion:

- **S** what do you See?
- **H** what’s Happening to your feelings?
- **O** relate it to your Own lives
- **W** Why do we face these problems?
- **E**
- **D** what can we Do about it? (Peterson, 2009, p. 313; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988).

Through this process, students are encouraged to critically analyze their reactions to a text and have a structured dialogue with others about the text, what it means, what it does, and what can be done about it (Peterson, 2009).

Hall (1998) presents another model for critically questioning:
1. What is this text asking you to think or feel?
2. Do you agree with the point of view being offered?
3. What or who is left out?
4. Would you have left them out?

In this way, students are being asked to examine who is under- or misrepresented in a text. They are then asked to consider the text from another's perspective (Hall, 1998).

Simpson (1996) cautions that the questions teachers ask may not provoke critical responses. In a study of written student responses to teacher-formulated questions about a text, Simpson noticed that student responses did not reflect critical engagement with the text, even though the questions attempted to stimulate critical reflection. Students were then asked to generate their own questions for small group dialogue. Utilizing their questions, students engaged in discussion that stimulated a deeper, more critical response to the text. Even simple questions tended to generate more discussion among the students and had the added advantage of drawing students with multiple levels of ability into the discussion (Simpson, 1996). This may also point back to the need for true generative themes that reflect the lives of students—students may not be as connected to texts, questions, and themes that lack a connection to their lives (Peterson, 2009). This experience may also point to the fruitfulness of discussion and dialogue over merely providing reflective answers to questions in written form (Simpson, 1996).

Critical Literacy Practices

As mentioned above, critical pedagogues resist turning critical literacy practice into a set method or technique. Nevertheless, there are practices common to many
critical literacy classrooms. In review of the literature related to critical literacy practice, Behrman (2006) found six broad categories of classroom activity:

1. Reading supplementary texts: based on the assumption that traditional texts are inadequate and often leave out social issues, supplementary material is included in instruction. This does not necessarily invalidate study of the traditional text; rather supplementary materials are included to encourage a comparison with and critical analysis of the traditional text.

2. Reading multiple texts: multiple texts dealing with the same topic help students to see the subjectivity of authorship. By seeing multiple points of view on the same subject, students see that texts do not present an absolute “truth”, but rather the perspective of the author.

3. Reading from a resistant perspective: students are encouraged to consider how those individuals with different identities or frames of reference may approach a text. This is closely tied with an analysis of the position an author takes and how the author attempts to position the reader in turn. This can also be used to help students analyze media and advertisement (Wilson, 2001). Resistant reading also relies on being able to deconstruct a text and can be tied in with functional grammar instruction, such as examining an author’s word choice and sentence structures (Behrman, 2006). Ultimately, the goal of resistant reading is to get readers to critically look at what a text is saying, rather than just absorbing messages uncritically.

4. Producing countertexts: countertexts can range from personal response/journaling to creation of prose and poetry. For example, students could create their own
textbooks on the issues they study to create an alternative sources and perspectives (Peterson, 2009). Countertexts legitimate students’ voices and encourage them to actively reflect and engage with alternative perspectives.

5. Conducting student-choice research projects: students choose a personal topic and then conduct research on it. For this type of project to enter the realm of critical literacy, however, students need to become engaged in a problem that impacts them, and reflect upon social, historical, and cultural forces that aggravate or alleviate the problem.

6. Taking social action: students utilize their critical skills in order to challenge inequity by engaging in social action projects in the community, making a real difference in the lives of others. Combining theory/reflection and action—also called ‘praxis’—is a key component of Freirean critical pedagogy (Shor, 2009). Taking action allows students to recognize literacy in its full potential as a vehicle for social change (Behrman, 2006).

Behrman (2006) makes clear that these activities are frequently merged within the context of classroom practice, with students active in two or more of the activities simultaneously.

Ciardiello (2004) does provide a concrete method from his own practice that deserves some examination. Ciardiello’s model operates within the context of critical conversations on social justice topics. He outlines a protocol for the utilization of critical literacy practices based on five steps:

1. Select a topic for in-depth study in areas related to social justice or human rights that is culturally relevant and age appropriate
2. Teach the connection between the concepts of critical literacy and democracy
3. Introduce and describe the five critical literacy practices (detailed below)
4. Select children’s literature to engage students with critical conversations about a social justice issue
5. Examine the social justice issue employing the five critical literacy practices
   (Ciardiello, 2004, p. 140)

Within this protocol for bringing critical literacy into the classroom, Ciardiello utilizes the five critical literacy practices used to investigate a social justice issue:

1. Examining multiple perspectives: Multiple perspectives on a topic help students to view texts as an ideological construction (Freire, 1970). This can be initiated by having simple, but critical, conversations that relate to the students’ lives, such as different perspectives that might be had on a family issue (Ciardiello, 2004). From there, a text can be examined from multiple perspectives as well, to help students understand that no single version of a text tells the whole story, and there is often information missing or contradictions between texts.

2. Finding an authentic voice: voice is “the opportunity to express oneself without regard to power or position” and there are voices that are in a dominant position and a silenced position (Ciardiello, 2004, p. 142). Understanding this and listening for the multiple voices in a text that are heard or unheard can be a complex idea for children, but is important in critical literacy practice. Again, this can be related to students’ personal experiences, perhaps of power dynamics within a family. From there, stories can be examined to listen for dominant and silent voices.
3. Recognizing social barriers and crossing borders of separation: barriers and borders position people as outsiders or insiders. Exclusion is a common experience for students and there are plenty of opportunities to relate this topic to students' life. Texts can be examined for who is excluded and who is not.

4. Regaining one's identity: oppressed and excluded groups often internalize their oppression and begin to believe the dominant discourse about their own inferiority. Helping students understand being treated as a 'non-person' based on one's identity can be done through conversation about being treated poorly based on characteristics such as skin color, hair, mannerisms, appearance, etc., or through the use of stories that show others being mocked because of their difference from the dominant "norm." Further discussions can be had about how being teased can make people come to believe the negative things others say, and how this can occur to oppressed groups as a whole.

5. The call of service/service-learning: taking action to create a better society is a key piece of critical pedagogy (Shor, 2009). Within the classroom, students can be introduced to service organizations that allow them to participate in the world outside of the classroom (Ciardiello, 2004). Depending on school and parental support, students can engage in community action, always motivated by and addressing student interests while meeting actual community needs (Peterson, 2009).

6. Through these practices Ciardiello tries to spark critical discussion of issues of social justice and democracy by making them relevant to students' lives. This is
intended to give students opportunities for agency and civic competence in relationship to issues of social justice (Ciardiello, 2004).

While critical literacy may be implemented in the classroom in numerous ways depending on the individual classroom and its social context, the models above outline some commonalities: texts contain multiple meanings and also carry powerful messages about race, power, gender, and other identities. It is important to step back and analyze why these messages are present, and the purposes they serve (Shor, 2009). Students can begin to do this from an early age, especially if abstract concepts can be related to concrete experiences in their lives (Hall, 1998; Ciardiello, 2004). When students can step back from a text, listen to what it is saying, challenge interpretations of the text, and consider how others might view the text, then they are on their way to becoming critically literate subjects in their education (Smith, 2005).

Schools that “silence” students’ voices teach those students that their experiences and are neither valued nor relevant (Fine, 1987). For these students, schooling can become yet another obstacle in life, yet another institution that serves to deny them opportunity by ignoring their reality. Critical pedagogy gives students the tools such as critical literacy to name and critique oppression in their lives and communities, thus transcending the silence. Becoming conscious of their ability to change society empowers students to envision and bring about a more just, equitable society (Freire, 1970).
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

This research study is designed to understand the attitudes and conceptions a group of teacher education students constructed about critical literacy after having encountered the concept in a foundational elementary literacy course. In addition to understanding their attitudes towards critical literacy, this project assesses these preservice teachers' ability to put critical literacy into practice through the creation of lesson plans. The goal of this research is to examine the potentialities and problems faced in transitioning critical literacy from theory into practice.

Population

The teacher education students who are the subjects of this study participated in a foundational literacy course in which they studied how children become literate beings and the role educators play in that development. These preservice teachers were all seeking a teaching certification that will permit them to work with elementary-level students in public schools. The 31 students in the class who participated in the study consisted of a mix of undergraduates and graduates. Of the 31 students, 29 chose to participate in the research.

As part of their course of study, these preservice teachers engaged in readings, lectures, and discussions about critical literacy. As a culminating project, they developed thematic units addressing a particular social issue of their choice. These thematic units
were to include aspects of critical literacy the students had learned about through their coursework. Because this course is geared towards preservice teachers at an early point in their teacher education, the students were not required to actually teach the lessons, only to develop lessons they could potentially use in the future. The students were also asked to reflect on their completed units in a written assignment at the end of the course.

Because the researcher participates in the same teacher education program and could potentially find employment in the same geographic region as these future teachers, anonymity was given priority over identifying demographic characteristics. Solely the last four digits of the students' phone numbers identify student work and responses, and no potentially identifying questions were asked. The researcher and the professor of the course made it clear that participation in the study would not impact the students' grades.

**Research Design**

To construct an understanding of the preservice teachers experience with critical literacy, the researcher collected data through the administration of a survey, examination of the completed thematic units, and analysis of the students' responses to reflective questions. A qualitative orientation towards the research, in which the researcher attempts to interpret meaning through the representations created by the subject of the research, was chosen because it best allows the voice of the subject to be heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). A qualitative approach is consistent with critical theory and critical pedagogy in its recognition that social phenomena do not have an independent meaning outside of the meaning of the individuals who participate in those phenomena (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). This research project focuses on the understanding this particular class of preservice teachers constructed about critical literacy. This is
accomplished through a survey of the general attitude of the entire class after working with critical literacy in the creation of their thematic units and an analysis of the completed thematic units and responses to reflective questions on the students’ experiences with critical literacy. When assembled, this data provides multiple facets through which to understand the students’ experience with critical literacy.

Survey

The survey administered to the students after the completion of their thematic units consisted of a series of questions designed to gain an understanding of the preservice teachers’ attitudes towards work with critical literacy. Research participants were asked to rate on a four-point scale:

- Their understanding of critical literacy
- How important critical literacy is at the elementary level
- The appropriateness of including controversial issues into the elementary curriculum
- Their comfort discussing those controversial issues with elementary students
- Their awareness of the political nature of critical literacy
- The level of inclusion of critical literacy in their project
- Their overall experience with critical literacy
- Their likelihood of incorporating critical literacy in their future teaching.

In addition, the students were asked to provide short written responses asking for:

- Their own definition of critical literacy
- The most challenging aspects of including critical literacy in their thematic units.
- Further comments on critical literacy they felt were relevant.
A survey for the entire class was chosen for data collection because in-depth interaction with each student in the class was not feasible within the context of the timeframe for this study (Gall et al., 2005, p. 313). Surveys, while ostensibly quantitative in orientation, do provide useful general data about a population (Gall et al., 2005). Guba and Lincoln (2005) make it clear that quantitative and qualitative methods are not exclusive of each other.

**Reflective Questions**

Students were also asked to provide responses to reflective questions upon completion of their thematic units as part of their coursework. From the total population of research participants, eight reflective responses were randomly selected. These eight were randomly chosen out of a concern for equitable opportunity for the preservice teachers to have their voices heard through their reflective responses (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Random selection ensures that no group of students were privileged in the study based on their perspective towards critical literacy being in line with that of the researcher's perspective. The following are the reflective prompts given to the students:

- Explain what you have learned about critical literacy and describe how your thematic unit reflects your knowledge about critical literacy.
- List all challenges you have faced when using critical literacy principles to create your thematic unit.
- Describe how critical literacy has impacted (1) your personal beliefs in teaching reading and (2) your personal beliefs about students and their learning.
- Will you continue to use what you have learned about critical literacy in future teaching? Explain.
The responses to the reflective questions were examined using an interpretational analysis in which the responses were systematically analyzed for emerging constructs, themes, and patterns in their reflection on working with critical literacy (Gall et al., 2005, p. 315). Interpretational analysis, through a system of coding and categorizing, can help make explicit commonalities and differences between the selected students’ responses to reflective prompts.

Within this study, each of the eight sampled reflective response questions were analyzed for common themes. Each question prompt was examined to pull out key terms and concepts that the preservice teachers’ used to reflect on their experience with critical literacy. The terms and concepts that each preservice teacher used were compared with those used by the other preservice teachers. Terms and concepts used by multiple teachers were then identified as common themes of the sampled reflective responses. Once these themes were identified, the researcher reexamined the context and meaning each preservice teacher attached to the concept or term to identify whether the preservice teachers approached and understood the theme in similar or different ways. In addition to highlighting common themes, anomalous responses to a reflective response were also identified in order to emphasize were a minority of the sample differed from the majority of responses.

**Thematic Units**

For their thematic unit, the preservice teachers were expected to create five sequential lessons aimed at elementary-level students. The unit was to focus on a social issue and incorporate elements of critical literacy that the students had learned about through the course of study. The students detailed how the lessons aligned with state
standards, learning objectives, materials needed, lesson procedure, and assessment. From the total population of students in the class, eight thematic units were analyzed. These eight sampled units were from the same eight randomly sampled reflective question responses.

The thematic units were subjected to a reflective analysis based on the researcher’s knowledge of critical literacy theories and practices rooted in the professional literature. Reflective analysis is a method that relies on the researcher’s intuition and judgment, rooted in a theoretical foundation to assess educational material, akin to the way in which an art critic would study a piece of artwork to develop an appreciation of its elements and message (Gall et al., 2005, p. 318). Reflective analysis is often used to evaluate aspects of educational programs and methods to understand strengths and weaknesses in curricular materials and pedagogical approaches (Gall et al., 2005).

In this vein, the researcher utilized his knowledge of critical literacy theory to examine the thematic units to determine the extent to which critical literacy practice was incorporated into the preservice teachers' lesson plans. At a macro level, the lessons in each unit were examined to see whether issues of power and inequality in society were present in the lesson. Each lesson was also examined to see whether critical literacy activities commonly identified in the professional literature were present or not. In addition to examining activities, planned teacher interaction with students was also analyzed to see if it promoted critical thought. Special attention was given to whether planned questioning promoted critical or transactional understanding of a text. Finally,
the units were also closely examined to understand whether they promoted critical thought about a social issue or reinforced biases and commonplace assumptions.

**Bricolage**

The survey, reflective responses, and thematic units triangulate this research. By triangulation, the researcher agrees with Flick (2002) that triangulation’s value should not be viewed in terms of objective validity, but that it should be conceptualized as bringing greater depth and richness to the research. In essence, triangulation provides multiple platforms in which the subjects of the study can make their voices heard. Each source of data reflects the research subjects’ experience with critical literacy in different ways. Together these data sources create what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) call *bricolage*, a collection of bits and pieces of information the researcher is able to collect that, when assembled, form a whole. When conceived in terms of *bricolage*, one sees how each source of data provides its own unique perspective on the subjects’ experiences with critical literacy while simultaneously impacting how one views the other data sources. *Bricolage* is inherently mixed-methods, as it emphasizes the researcher using whatever data sources are present to construct an understanding of the phenomena under study. The researcher can be seen as a *bricoleur*, an assembler of the pieces to form a coherent whole (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In this case, the researcher will take the analyses of the data sources and weave them together, allowing them to mingle together and reflect on their shared meaning to construct an understanding of these preservice teachers’ first steps in critical literacy.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

At the end of the foundational literacy course, the preservice teachers were surveyed on their experience working with critical literacy. As part of their regular coursework, the preservice teachers completed thematic units dealing with social issues that were to include examples of critical literacy practice. Upon completion of their units, the preservice teachers also responded to four reflective questions. As part of the research study, eight of these thematic units and reflective responses were randomly selected.

The survey revealed that strong majorities of the class felt they understood critical literacy and had incorporated it into their thematic units. Attitudes towards critical literacy were also heavily slanted towards the positive. These results were corroborated sample of reflective responses, which also tilted towards positive attitudes towards work with critical literacy. In both the survey and the sampled reflective responses, the majority of preservice teachers provided definitions of critical literacy that touched on at least some aspects of critical literacy practice.

An examination of the sampled thematic units revealed very little critical literacy practice, however. While dealing with social issues, the thematic units rarely took a critical stance. Examining the social issues and texts in the context of unequal power
relations was noticeably absent from the thematic units. The texts used in the study of the social issues were mostly approached using transactional literacy as opposed to critical literacy. In addition, several of the units contain examples of bias and social assumptions that are problematic from a critical perspective. In short, while the preservice teachers felt they understood critical literacy and included it in their units, the sample of thematic units suggests that actually putting critical literacy into practice was problematic.

Survey

The survey was administered to preservice teachers upon completion of their thematic units and was intended to paint a picture of the general class attitude towards their experience with critical literacy. The class both rated aspects of their critical literacy experience on a four-point scale and provided short written responses when prompted.

The responses to critical literacy at the time of the survey show that a large majority of students felt they had a basic understanding of critical literacy and were somewhat aware of its political nature. A majority of students responded that critical literacy instruction is important at the elementary level, that it is appropriate to include controversial topics in the elementary curriculum, and that they would be at least somewhat comfortable discussing controversial topics with elementary-aged students. When asked to evaluate their incorporation of critical literacy in their thematic units, most believed they included examples of critical literacy in their thematic units, and felt that their experience creating critical literacy thematic units was somewhat or very positive. All students responded that they would use critical literacy in future teaching.
The following table provides a breakdown of the students' ratings of their experience and attitudes towards critical literacy on a four-point scale. The survey is broken down according to survey prompt and response, with bolded numbers indicating the number of students who selected the corresponding responses. The number of responses under each category corresponds to the number that selected that response out of the 29 surveyed students.
Table 1. Critical Literacy Survey Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Prompt</th>
<th>Survey Response</th>
<th>Student Responses Bolded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rate your understanding of critical literacy.</td>
<td>Do not understand it 0</td>
<td>Understand it somewhat 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is critical literacy in literacy instruction at the elementary level?</td>
<td>Very unimportant 2</td>
<td>Somewhat unimportant 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How appropriate is it to include controversial issues in the elementary curriculum?</td>
<td>Very inappropriate 1</td>
<td>Somewhat inappropriate 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How comfortable are you discussing controversial issues with elementary students?</td>
<td>Very uncomfortable 0</td>
<td>Somewhat uncomfortable 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How aware are you of the political nature of critical literacy?</td>
<td>Very unaware 2</td>
<td>Somewhat unaware 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate your inclusion of critical literacy in your project.</td>
<td>Did not include 0</td>
<td>Only a few examples 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate your experience with critical literacy and creating a critical literacy project.</td>
<td>Very negative 0</td>
<td>Somewhat negative 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How likely are you to incorporate critical literacy in your future teaching?</td>
<td>Very unlikely 0</td>
<td>Somewhat unlikely 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Written responses to questions about definitions of critical literacy and challenges students faced also revealed broad, common themes in the class members' understanding and experience of critical literacy. When asked to define critical literacy in their own words, the students' responses broke down into the following broad themes:
Critical thinking related to language arts and/or social issues
Questioning and challenging ideas about social issues
Examining multiple perspectives
Learning about social issues

As asked about what the students found most challenging in working with critical literacy, a majority indicated that finding age-appropriate materials and keeping the content/instruction age-appropriate were their greatest challenges. Other responses focused on formulating the right questions and communicating issues properly to students. Four responses listed not wanting to make anyone uncomfortable or offended as the greatest challenge.

Space was provided on the survey for students to add any additional pertinent comments. Five students who provided additional comments were generally positive, noting that critical literacy was very important, that it needed to be taught more and at younger ages, and were glad they were introduced to the topic. One student cautioned that topics needed to be relevant and age appropriate, that not all topics were good for elementary-aged students.

Reflective Question Response

As they completed their thematic units, the class was provided with four questions to prompt reflection on their experience with critical literacy. Of the 29 participants in the survey, eight reflective responses were randomly selected (these correspond with the eight thematic unit samples, as detailed below). The eight sampled reflective question responses corroborate elements of the survey response, while also revealing additional aspects of the preservice teachers' conceptions of critical literacy. As in the survey,
many of the definitions of critical literacy emphasized the importance of “critical thinking.” Critical thinking is a somewhat vague and ill-defined term. For instance, one student defined critical thinking in terms of comprehending the book being read while others who included critical thinking in their definitions of critical literacy also included thinking about issues in new ways, examining underlying meaning, formulating questions about society and authorship, and moving beyond right and wrong—all potential conceptions of critical thinking in line with critical literacy practice.

Many responses also linked critical thinking with considering multiple perspectives. Being able to see multiple perspectives in an issue or text is an important aspect of critical education. Although many did not clarify what they meant by incorporating multiple perspectives, some of the preservice teachers did explain further. One stated that multiple perspectives should be used “...to encourage the students to be critical and try to think about things from another perspective.” A preservice teacher who developed a unit on immigration emphasized that seeing the issue from multiple perspectives—specifically from an immigrant’s perspective—could challenge students to step outside of the commonplace of their own lives. In this case, the preservice teacher frames the incorporation of multiple perspectives as a critical disrupting agent, challenging learners to consider how the world might look different based on another person's experience. Other students provided a more limited explanation of using multiple perspectives as a way of seeing an issue from all viewpoints, a way of looking at multiple perspectives that may or may not be in line with the emancipatory goals of critical literacy practice, depending on the ability to challenge viewpoints which serve to uphold a dominant, unequal status quo.
Another common theme to emerge from the responses related to the issue of age appropriateness. For many of the teacher education students, finding age-appropriate materials or developing age-appropriate learning experiences was a primary challenge. This may suggest a strong concern with being able to find the right techniques or the right books/materials to enable the preservice teachers to practice critical literacy. One of the preservice teachers questioned the appropriateness of teaching “heavy issues” to elementary-age students, feeling that young students should not have to know about these topics and that middle school was the appropriate age to begin studying social issues. Another of the preservice teachers was concerned that lessons should be constructed so as not to upset parents. Yet another was concerned with not wanting to spark arguments over contentious issues. Other challenges mentioned in the reflective responses included going beyond asking students how they “feel” about an issue, dealing with uncomfortable questions, and incorporating multiple perspectives.

Despite these challenges, six of the eight sampled preservice teachers voiced support for studying critical issues at a young age. Seven of them planned to implement what they understood to be critical literacy in their future classrooms. Two students expressed a belief in the importance of critical literacy to the future of their pupils, with one explaining that it would help potential students develop into more intelligent and accepting citizens. The general acceptance of what they conceived of as critical literacy and the necessity of studying difficult topics in the classroom seems to suggest that these teacher education students view confronting social issues as important to the education profession.
Thematic Units

The centerpiece of the preservice teachers' critical literacy work was a thematic unit of at least five lessons the course professor asked each of them to develop. Of the 29 research participants, eight thematic units were randomly selected (these correspond to the eight reflective response samples). The eight thematic units examined cover a variety of social issues at an elementary level of instruction, including:

- Child labor
- Homelessness
- The impact of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks
- Diversity
- Inclusivity of people who are differently-abled
- Bullying
- Body image
- Immigration.

While all the topics of the thematic units are amenable to critical literacy, reflective analysis rooted in the professional literature revealed that none of the units actually engage in sustained critical literacy practice. By this, the researcher notes that some of the units contain moments of criticality that will be detailed below, but these are not carried through to an extent that would make the larger unit (or, in many cases, the individual lessons within the unit) critical. Because the units contain little that is critical, they will not be dealt with on a unit-by-unit basis. Instead, common themes contributing to or inhibiting the criticality of the units will be examined.
There are two major issues that prevent most of the units from being considered as sustained examples of critical literacy. First, the units lack a critique of power and how power imbalances impact the particular social issue. Focusing on power relations is an important element of critical literacy work (Hall & Piazza, 2008). The lack of focus on power relations causes important understandings of critical issues to be missed. For instance, in the unit on child labor, there is no moment when children examine how the economically better off benefit from child labor practices. Later in the unit, when the students are asked to consider why child labor practices persist despite laws against such labor, there is no context of asking who benefits from child labor to ground the question. In the unit on homelessness, none of the lessons provides opportunities to examine how issues of power and distribution of economic resources impacts homelessness, so students are left with an impression of homelessness as either a result of accident or personal irresponsibility. Even in the unit on bullying there are no questions about how power dynamics dehumanize and lead to aggression against others. These are just a few examples of a problem that is really endemic to all of the units. Without a deeper examination of how social issues are rooted in power dynamics, there is little opportunity to be critical in a meaningful way.

One momentary exception to the lack of focus on power in all of these thematic units comes during the unit on diversity. After reading The Sneetches and Other Stories, a story by Dr. Seuss about one group of creatures discriminating against another because of a physical characteristic, the students have an opportunity to experience what it is like to be discriminated against. One group is denied privileges for half the day because they are not wearing a star, while the others are given the privileges. Halfway through the
day, roles are reversed. In a debriefing on their experience, the teacher asks students who
had privileges if they felt powerful and how having that power made them feel. In this
moment, students are encouraged to critically examine how power imbalances impact
one’s views of marginalized populations.

A second issue is the lack of critical engagement with the actual texts used in the
units. Textual interaction within the units is either used to contextualize learning about
the social issue, or is used in a way that would be considered transactional, in which
students reflect on personal meaning derived from the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). In
contrast, critical literacy practice places the text at the center of learning and encourages
students to go beyond the personal to examine what the text says about society. When
texts are used solely to provide a context for studying a social issue, the text is not longer
at the center of what is, ostensibly, a literacy lesson. One example of this comes in the
unit on child labor, in which a lesson utilizes a children’s book on Mexican-American
farm worker and activist César Chávez, but only as a post-instruction piece. The book is
only used after the teacher has taught about child labor, as opposed to using the text to
understand and interrogate the issue under study. In the unit on inclusivity, texts dealing
with various differently-abled populations are often used as readings prior to the actual
learning about inclusivity. Through placing the text at the periphery of a lesson, the
lesson ceases to be a literacy lesson at all.

In many of the units the text is at the center of the lesson, although the
accompanying interaction with and thought about the text is rarely critical. Much of this
may result from the lack of focus on power dynamics and the larger social context of the
topic as explained above. Instead, many of the units focus on transactional reactions to
the topic of study. This results in questions that draw out personal meaning from the text. Often these questions ask students how they “feel” about a given topic and what they “feel” could be done about the topic. While these questions certainly have a place in literacy instruction, they could not be considered critical, as they do not examine how social and historical factors within the text and within students’ lives impact “feelings.” In essence, these questions do not read society, power, and culture into the text. They divert inquiry into the text and the social issue into personal reflectivity lacking social connectedness. For instance, in the unit on homelessness, the preservice teacher encourages students to consider what it would feel like to be homeless and how it would feel to help homeless people. Similarly, the unit on immigration asks students to consider how they would feel if they were immigrants living in a strange, foreign culture. While learning about child labor, students are encouraged to consider how they would feel if they had to work all day.

While transactional level questioning was common to all units, the unit on body image did provide a moment critical literacy, in this case a critical examination of print media. During one of the unit’s lessons, students were to examine magazine advertisements to analyze and identify how they promoted standards of beauty. In the lesson, the teacher asks students not only how the advertisements make them feel, but also why they think corporations would use these images to sell products and how that in turn makes people feel about their bodies. In this case, the lesson provided the opportunity to engage with media advertisements (a visual text) and consider how the texts position readers to feel and think in ways that may be adverse to their own interests, with the potential to develop resistant reading strategies, an important critical literacy
practice (Behrman, 2006). Within the lesson, students could be encouraged to read issues of power into a text and examine how texts attempt to position consumers of the text to believe certain things, an essential element of critical literacy practice.

Despite a few exceptions, the lack of a critical focus on power and critical engagement with texts removes two necessary qualities for considering these units as examples of critical literacy practice. However, there are some aspects of lessons within the units that do display nascent potential for critical pedagogical practice. All of the units attempt to position the learner to see the social issue from multiple perspectives. In some cases, this comes in the form of empathizing with and understanding the subaltern’s perspective. As mentioned above, the units on homelessness, immigration, and child labor all position students to consider the point of view of the subaltern (albeit in a highly personalized, transactional context). The unit on bullying goes beyond purely examining the issue from the perspective of the “victim” to also questioning the motivation of the bully. Two of the units ask students to examine multiple viewpoints on a topic. The unit covering the events of September 11th, 2001, and the unit covering immigration both contain lessons in which students research differing viewpoints on the given topic and then debate the merits of those viewpoints. Providing students with an opportunity to identify with other viewpoints on topic moves beyond merely the personal to consider how others understand and make sense of a social issue. But it is essential to also critique dominant perspectives based on power inequities. It is not clear that these two units provide the necessary critical context to allow students to challenge oppressive narratives that do not serve the emancipatory bent of critical pedagogical practice (Giroux, 2009a).
Many of the units also attempt to provide some platform for students to bring their own voices to a social issue. Providing students with an opportunity to make their voices heard restores some measure of subjectivity to the process of learning about a social issue. In the body image unit, student voice is encouraged through producing a counternarrative to media-created negative messages in the form of a student-created "I Like Me!" booklet. After the experiment with discrimination based on *The Sneetches* in the diversity unit, students are encouraged to create a list of privileges all people should have. In a similar vein, students in the bullying unit are charged with creating a "bill of rights" for all students. The child labor unit contains a lesson in which students create a newspaper article on solutions to ending child labor. In the immigration unit, students create a fictional immigration narratives based on what they learned about the immigration experience.

A few of the units contain the potential for students to take action on the social issue being studied. The list of privileges in the diversity unit and the student "bill of rights" in the bullying unit both have potential to be student action projects if they are to be actually implemented in the classroom. In the unit on the events of September 11th, 2001, students are allowed to choose a culminating project at the end of the unit, with one suggestion being writing to an elected official about the students' opinions about going to war. The unit on homelessness also provides an opportunity to take action to help homeless people (albeit within the context of providing charity). While these are not necessarily student led action projects, nor do they necessarily involve the students in a vision of working for deeper social change, they do provide students an opportunity to see themselves as active agents in the larger world.
A final note about a few of the units is necessary. Some of them exhibit uncritical assumptions that could be considered biased. For instance, in the unit on child labor, students are asked to consider their own “fortunate” station in life compared to child laborers in other countries. Teaching from this perspective appears biased towards an assumption that all students live lives of comfort and prosperity. How would students from economically marginal backgrounds react to such an assumption? In the unit on immigration, students are asked to brainstorm how “great” America is as a basis for understanding why immigrants want to come to the United States. Biased language such as this sets a stage for uncritical absorption of nationalistic narratives. The unit on the homeless also contains narratives and suggestions that homelessness may result from irresponsible behavior, a biased notion that is not challenged anywhere within the lessons of the unit. In addition, there is no consideration that a student in the classroom could potentially be homeless. In essence, many of the units rarely engage with the possible presence of “the other” within the classroom itself. The presence of bias or uncritical assumptions may point to a lack of examination of and reflection upon the social issue being studied.

Discussion

When considered as a whole, the results of the survey, reflective question responses, and thematic units seem to indicate a contradiction between the preservice teachers’ perceptions of their understanding of critical literacy and their actual ability to create thematic units that employ sustained critical literacy practice. The survey results show that the class felt they understood critical literacy, and the selection of reflective question responses demonstrated some understanding of critical literacy practice. Survey
responses were also heavily slanted towards positive conceptions of critical literacy, which was also reinforced by the sampling of reflective question responses. With a few exceptions, the preservice teachers also indicated that critical literacy is essential for students to better understand social issues, become more accepting people, and achieve success in the future.

The sampling of thematic units and reflective question responses also indicate a desire to motivate students to use higher-level thinking skills, to consider issues from multiple perspectives, provide students with a platform to make their voice heard, and, in some cases, take concrete action related to the particular social issue under study. While the evidence does point to some of the students being concerned with the age-appropriateness of studying difficult social issues, much of the concern relative to age-appropriateness centered on finding the right books, materials, or questions to use when teaching difficult issues. In all, the students seem very receptive to injecting social issues into the elementary-age classroom.

Perceived understanding of critical literacy and receptivity towards it does not equate with being able to implement critical literacy practice. The thematic units did not demonstrate a critical approach. The eight units were only sampling of the entire class, but the problems that prevented the units from being considered critical were common throughout the sample. The units lacked critical focus on power dynamics and therefore did not read power differentials into the texts that would have formed a basis for critical literacy, and in some cases actually reinforced biased views and assumptions related to the social issue under study. The near complete absence of larger social critique may suggest that these students are not actually critical themselves. Neither the students in the
survey nor those in the sampling of reflective responses mentioned personal reflection on social issues as a challenge or even an aspect of critical practice. In contrast, teachers who practice critical literacy note that an understanding of one's own biases and beliefs is essential to critical literacy practice (Hall & Piazza, 2008). Critical literacy practice, in the absence of a commitment to its theoretical and philosophical foundations, will be inauthentic and ineffective (McDaniel, 2004, p. 475).

The lack of criticality is also apparent in the way the preservice teachers interact with the texts in their units. Apol (1998) suggests that before one can help students become critical, one must become critical oneself, and this involves being able to recognize and evaluate messages embedded within texts. Yet, the analysis of the thematic units uncovers the lack of inquiry into the underlying messages present in the texts. This bears some similarity to Pamela Jewett's (2007) study of teachers in her graduate course on children's literature in which she asked the teachers to adopt both a transactional and a critical reading of children's literature. Jewett observed that the teachers readily adopted transactional perspectives of the books they encountered in the course, but getting them to approach the books from a critical perspective was difficult. Active attempts to involve the teachers in examining issues of racism and inequity in children's literature occasionally sparked critical conversations, but many of the teachers resisted adopting a language of critique and resistance to the often inequitable messages present in children's literature. In the case of the subjects of this study, there is an acknowledgement that critical literacy involves questioning the underlying meanings of the texts, but this was not put into practice in a critical way. Rather the preservice teachers defaulted to a transactional approach.
The evidence is not clear whether the subjects of this research are resistant to or just unaware of the deeper nature of critical literacy (or, if they were more aware, if they would become more resistant). The preservice teachers' positive attitude to addressing social issues in the classroom may indicate an enthusiasm and willingness to engage with difficult topics in the elementary classroom. But would they have such positive attitudes to adopting critical practices whose ultimate purpose is to critique and challenge many of the underlying narratives and assumptions central to American society? This type of teaching requires going against the grain of the dominant culture and its socio-historical and meritocratic narratives to recover the moral imperative of teaching (Giroux, 2009b; Peterson, 2009). Yet, the subjects of this research do not mention these as the challenges they faced in creating critical literacy units. Some students were able to identify the role of questioning and challenging assumptions and examining topics from multiple perspectives as aspects of critical literacy, but were then unable to put these into practice in a critical way. Some definitions of critical literacy centered on learning about social issues. While social issues are an essential aspect of critical literacy practice, how the social issues are addressed is more important. As Hall and Piazza (2008) and Wason-Ellam (1997) point out, it is entirely possible to teach about and use texts centered on social issues without actually stimulating students to critically engage with the material. Just including texts that address social issues into the curriculum does not equal critical literacy practice. Unless the text is critically examined in the light of social context and power relationships, it is possible to have a very uncritical approach to learning about social issues.
Perhaps it is hardly surprising that these preservice teachers do not appear to be critical themselves. Theories of critical pedagogy would suggest that just introducing the teachers to the concept of critical literacy is not going to create critical teachers. “Banking” information, even if it is critical, does not necessarily create a changed mindset. Freire (1970) points out that banking education, even if it is ostensibly emancipatory, does not involve posing the problems that are necessary to creating the subjectivity and agency essential to the creation of individuals capable of taking action to critique and change an unequal society. In essence, just telling teachers to become critical and teach critically is not sufficient. Providing these preservice teachers with readings and lectures on critical literacy theory and examples of how it can be implemented may or may not be sufficient preparation for implementation of critical literacy practice. But the researcher would suggest that this is beside the point.

Preservice teachers can be provided with multiple examples of how to implement critical literacy practice, but if they are not critical subjects themselves, they will ultimately be unable to approach the topic of study from a critical perspective (McDaniel, 2004). Critical pedagogues resist turning critical practice into a set methodology for the precise reason that critical teaching is an orientation towards education for social change (Kinchenloe, 2008). The absence of even the most basic of critical questions about power and inequality, combined with the presence of bias, in the sampled thematic units suggests that the students are not prepared to be successful at creating sustained critical literacy practice. Creating critically minded teachers may require a more thorough rethinking of teacher education (Giroux, 2009b).
This is not to suggest that introducing these preservice teachers to concepts of critical literacy is without value. Their survey and reflective responses, combined with their thematic units, demonstrate a willingness to engage with social issues in the elementary classroom and a desire to engage students in higher level thinking. These could be seeds for critical practice in the future. The author's own experience of inspiration after encountering theories of critical pedagogy in teacher education coursework may suggest that there is potential for some of these preservice teachers to delve deeper into critical theories of education. But it must also be born in mind that this author's encounter with critical pedagogy happened within the context of prior encounters with political and social critique as well as progressive causes. In short, the author had already ventured down the path of critical subjectivity. In order for these preservice teachers to become critical educators of others, they must become critical subjects themselves.

It should be noted that this study does have limitations. Most of these preservice teachers are at an early point in their teacher education careers, and their experience with and development of effective lessons and units are at an early stage. They also were not in a position to actually teach their units in the classroom, so these lessons have not been observed in a teaching setting to see if the preservice teachers would have been able to draw out critical responses from students. Despite these limitations, the author feels that the common themes and issues present in the students' survey responses, thematic units, and reflective question responses demonstrate that the preservice teachers are not able to create learning experiences that could be considered sustained critical literacy practice. Most may feel that they have an understanding and willingness to utilize critical literacy,
but they are unable to put it into practice due to the lack of a larger critical perspective of power and inequity in society.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

This research project began with a desire to understand how a class of preservice teachers seeking initial certification at the elementary level would react to learning about and being asked to use critical literacy. Having approached critical literacy largely through self-study arising out of a previous experience with progressive ideals, the researcher wondered how a group of teacher education students would react to the idea of critical and emancipatory politics infused into the curriculum of the elementary classroom. As part of their coursework, the class developed thematic units on social issues that were to include critical literacy practice. At the end of their work, they were asked to reflect on their experience. To supplement this evidence, the students were asked to complete a survey on their general attitude toward critical literacy.

The evidence revealed a complex picture. The survey revealed a generally positive reaction to learning about and working with critical literacy, which was supported by a sampling of the reflective responses. The preservice teachers claimed to have a basic understanding of critical literacy, felt they had incorporated it into their units, and planned to use it in the future. With such positive reactions, it was disappointing to see so little sustained critical literacy practice in their thematic units. This discrepancy—between what the students said they understood and were favorable to and what they were actually able to put into practice—raises difficult questions about
whether the preservice teachers actually understood critical literacy, whether positive attitudes towards critical literacy were based on misconceptions, and whether these teacher education students were themselves critically subjective enough to engage in critical literacy. As to whether there were significant misconceptions, and how those misconceptions impacted positive attitudes towards critical literacy, further research (including interviews) would be necessary.

From the research evidence and the professional literature on critical literacy, the researcher believes that a lack of criticality may lie at the heart of the preservice teachers' general inability to create critical learning experiences. As McDaniel (2004) and Hall and Piazza (2008) make clear, critical teaching cannot occur in the absence of critical reflection by the teacher himself or herself. Without reflecting upon one's own beliefs and biases, critical teaching will be, at best, inauthentic (McDaniel, 2004). The lack of a truly critical perspective in any of the sampled thematic units, coupled with some instances of bias and problematic assumption, may suggest that just learning about critical literacy in a traditional classroom setting is not sufficient to create teachers capable of implementing critical practice. Without critically approaching social issues and texts themselves, how can these preservice teachers possibly create critical learning experiences for others? Explanations of the theory behind critical literacy and examples of how to implement it will not suffice if the educator is ultimately not critical.

The question arises as to how to create the conditions for teacher education students to become critical subjects themselves? It is not surprising, from the standpoint of critical and Freirean pedagogy, that traditional models of education do not lead to critical subjectivity on the part of preservice teachers. The problem-posing methods of
Paulo Freire do not just apply to children, and were, in fact, developed in the context of adult education (Gadotti, 1994). The creation of critical educators should be rooted in critical pedagogical practices. Henry Giroux (2009b) argues that most teacher education programs are not developing teachers who are “transformative intellectuals”, but rather producing educators who are less concerned with democratizing public schools than focusing on the technical aspects of teaching. Teacher education dwells more on procedure and technique than it fosters a concern for the social ends of public schooling. For Giroux, the focus on accountability, testing, standardization, and credentials has more to do with a conservative attack on education as a force for progressive social change than school reform. Creating critical educators is necessary to restore the moral imperative of education for democracy and equity in opposition to the narrow view of educating a future labor pool.

Giroux (2009b) formulates an idea of teacher education that orients itself towards the transformation of public schools (p. 445). Part of this process is to provide students with the language and concepts to analyze and critique the political shortcomings of public schools in the United States, as well as develop the knowledge and skills to generate curricula and practices necessary to create a critical classroom (p. 445). In this sense, teaching preservice teachers about critical literacy is important. But it is not sufficient. The political and moral considerations attendant upon public education in the interest of democracy and equity must be consistent throughout the teacher education program. In essence, Giroux argues that critique and political transformation must be at the heart of teacher education. Preservice teachers must see that education is about more than methods of introduction to particular subjects and disciplines. Schooling must assist
in the construction and transmission of critical, subjective citizenship (Giroux, 2009b, p. 447).

In this light, one sees that beginning to learn about concepts such as critical literacy are just the first steps into a critical subjectivity that must be continually cultivated throughout teacher education. Social critique and emancipatory goals should be at the heart of a teacher education program that seeks to create critically transformative educators. This means encouraging preservice teachers to see schooling as a place where a social system can be contested and a better world envisioned. To provide the conditions for this, the teacher education curriculum should be linked with critical theory in order for teachers to examine and critique traditional education practices that serve to privilege the dominant culture (Giroux, 2009b). Critical theory and critical pedagogy cannot be restricted to an educational philosophy or methodology course, but should be placed at the heart of each and every course in the teacher education program to provide multiple opportunities to engage in critique. Throughout the course of their education, preservice teachers should continually engage with the needs of a democratic, egalitarian society and how schools can work to meet those needs.

Central to the application of critical theory to the teacher education curriculum is an examination of knowledge as socially constructed, simultaneously representing and mediating the learner's social reality. Once knowledge is viewed as subjective rather than objective, teacher education students can begin to see how the creation of knowledge in the classroom also creates a social reality that carries with it the power to change that reality for the better. It is with this realization that teachers can begin to consider how to teach in ways that promote social change through knowledge of what is possible.
Throughout all of their coursework, it is essential that preservice teachers recognize this linkage between knowledge and the power to create change.

In a literacy context, teacher education that incorporates critical views of knowledge as socially constructed would move beyond the primacy of technical and developmental concerns (Giroux, 2009b). The researcher believes that literacy courses in teacher education should focus on how meaning is constructed from a text not just on a personal level, but how that meaning is situated within the lived reality of the reader/writer/speaker. Preservice teachers should see how language shapes consciousness and identity through the construction of reality. A critical literacy course would examine how texts position readers to think and feel certain ways about a topic. Through posing problems about how texts are implicated in positioning readers and fashioning a social reality, teacher education students could begin to develop ideas for how to bring in alternative viewpoints, deploy resistant reading, and develop counternarratives to fashion alternative realities. A focus on language as a powerful tool in the creation of social alternatives, rather than merely a method of communication, is a necessary component of a holistic teacher education program that seeks to create critically transformative educators.

Ultimately, it is up to teachers and teacher education programs to embrace the emancipatory political potential of the classroom. The decision to teach in the interest of equity and democracy or in reproducing inequity and social stasis depends on how teachers view their role in society. The pretense of neutrality, however, cannot honestly be maintained. The contradiction between the historic leveling goals of American public education and the reality of continuing inequity explodes the notion that all children in
the United States have the same opportunities. And whether teachers like it or not, their profession is politicized. Growing calls for standardization, testing, and accountability seem to be aimed more at discrediting public education and limiting teachers’ scope of influence to the most basic of skills (Giroux, 2009b; Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Education “reformers” continually push for “free-market” ideologies to be applied to public education, including voucher systems, charter schools, and privatization of public schools (Karp, 2010). Teachers’ ability to organize has itself been under attack for years, with their ability to collectively bargain on a variety of education-related issues being targeted in several states in early 2011 (Peterson, 2003; Ravitch, 2011). As one-time public school critic Diane Ravitch (2011) has noted, teachers feel increasingly under attack and blamed for what ails American schools.

As politics finds its way into their classrooms, will teachers be able to stand up for the egalitarian ideals of public education? From this research it is clear that if American schools are going to live up to the democratic ideals of reformers such as John Dewey and George Counts, teachers must be able to deploy social critique themselves. But teachers cannot just be told to become critical. The creation of the teacher as critical subject necessitates acknowledging the political nature of schooling and the creation of knowledge, opting for the cause of the disempowered in modern, capitalist society, and deploying critical pedagogy as lens through which to examine educational practice.

These principles must be consistent throughout all aspects of teacher education. The first steps into critical literacy must be rooted in this vision of the educator. Anything less is bound to be hesitant, faltering, and incomplete.
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