Short Communication

Critical Literacy and Literacies

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Abstract

Literacy emerged as a concept that meant the application of reading, writing and numeracy skills in the individual's everyday context. Nowadays, the concept of literacy takes on a central and multivariate dimension and is mobilized in several contexts, such as digital literacy, sustainability literacy and ocean literacy, just to name a few. This paper seeks to discuss these multiplicities of literacies through an approach supported in the critical literacy concept, as well as the implications of this stance.

Keywords

critical literacy, literacy, literacies

Within this perspective [Freire's critical literacy], literacy is not approached as merely a technical skill to be acquired, but as a necessary foundation for cultural action for freedom, a central aspect of what it means to be a self and socially constituted agent (Giroux, 2005, p. 11).

1. Introduction

Literacy emerged as a concept that meant the application of reading, writing and numeracy skills in the individual's everyday context. According to Martin (2006),

"Digital Literacy is the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process" (p. 155).

Nowadays, the concept of literacy takes on a central (Andrade, 2016; Misiaszek, 2019) and multivariate dimension and is mobilized in several contexts, such as digital literacy, sustainability literacy and ocean literacy, just to name a few (Santos & Serpa, 2017). However, these partial literacies, which can be translated into multi-literacies, seem to have a fragmentation by not carry out in-depth work on the causes, according to the critical literacy perspective (López, 2020; Yoon, Yol, Haag, & Simpson, 2018; Vasquez, 2017).

This paper seeks to discuss these multiplicities of literacies through an approach supported in the critical literacy concept, as well as the implications of this stance.

2. Critical Literacy

Despite the existence of various definitions and operationalization of the concept of critical literacy (López, 2020; Lee, 2011; Yoon et al., 2018), and with distinct theoretical influences—which generates misconceptions and ambiguities (Hearfield & Boughton, 2018; Vasquez, 2017; Luke, 2012; Hendrix-Soto, & Mosley Wetzel, 2018), the concept of critical literacy can, overall, be understood as "a theoretical and practical framework that can readily take on such challenges creating spaces for literacy work that can contribute to creating a more critically informed and just world" (Vasquez, 2017, p. 1). Table 1 depicts the main aspects of critical literacy, as proposed by Vasquez (2017).

Table 1. Key Aspects of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy should not be a topic to be covered or a unit to be studied.

While working across the curriculum, in the content areas, diverse students' cultural knowledge should be used to build curriculum.

From a critical literacy perspective the world is seen as a socially constructed text that can be read.

Texts are socially constructed and created or designed from particular perspectives.

Critical literacy involves making sense of the sociopolitical systems through which we live our lives and questioning these systems.

Critical literacy practices can be transformative and contribute to change inequitable ways of being and problematic social practices.

Text design and production are essential to critical literacy work.

Critical literacy is about imagining thoughtful ways of thinking about reconstructing and redesigning texts, images, and practices to convey different and more socially just and equitable messages and ways of being that have real-life effects and real-world impact.

Source: Vasquez (2017, p. 8 and p. 9).

In summary, Table 1 clearly shows that critical literacy, unlike piecemeal forms of literacy, is not reduced to the technical acquisition and application of reading, writing and numeracy skills in the individual's everyday context. Critical literacy is a concept with broader ambitions and seeks social

justice, by (i) criticizing the existing social order, translated into the ideology of the present and its institutions of maintenance of that society; and (2) fostering awareness and the need for change in social power relationships (Lee, 2011; Luke, 2012; Hearfield & Boughton, 2018; Hendrix-Soto & Mosley, 2018). Janks (2018) argues that "Ideal readers read with the text; critical readers read against the text. Both are necessary if we are to enjoy texts and engage with what they offer, without completely subjecting ourselves to them" (p. 96). All this creates barriers to the implementation of critical literacies (term favoured by Hendrix-Soto & Mosley Wetzel, 2018) (Table 2).

Table 2. Barriers to Critical Literacies

Literacies are not neutral, they are political.

Critical literacies as a tool for deconstructing and reconstructing the world.

Critical literacies struggle against the status quo.

Literacy is (re)conceived of broadly, beyond traditional print-centered reading and writing.

Literacy is situated, and critical literacies vary across contexts.

Source: Hendrix-Soto & Mosley Wetzel, 2018, p. 201 and p. 202.

This paper develops these critical literacy barriers through the analysis of Paulo Freire's proposal, which is based on emancipatory politics in the promotion of emancipatory literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987/2005).

3. Paulo Freire's Critical Literacy

For Paulo Freire, there is no neutral education (Nóvoa, 1997), nor does literacy consist of isolated skills (Lee, 2011). Conditions must be created for the learner to "be the subject of history" (Martins, 2000, p. 39). Educational practices produce meanings and shape the way the learner sees the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987/2005), and "Freire's fundamental principle [is] about the connection between education and politics, his recurrent question of learning to read the word and the world" (Morrow & Torres, 1997, p. 251).

According to Meek (2005), Paulo Freire wondered,

"why does literacy research and practice seem to ignore the social and ideological evidence of literate behaviour which is visible in the culture itself? [...] He insists that we all answer for ourselves, from our own reading of the word and the world" (p. vi and p. viii).

This paper mobilizes the proposal of critical literacy that stems from Paulo Freire's work:

"Aligned with Freire's pedagogy, critical literacy is intended to help the marginalized unveil unequal power relations and transform their lives through the empowerment of literacy education. Critical literacy argues that being critically literate is acquiring knowledge of literacy that can be turned into action to change the status quo" (Lee, 2011, p. 96).

For Paulo Freire, there is no neutral education, inasmuch that the reading of the word is always preceded by the reading of the world. Therefore, literacy is an eminently political process (Arocho,

2019; Nóvoa, 1997; Berthoff, 2005; Freire & Macedo, 1987/2005).

In the development of critical literacy and in the implementation of this transformative action towards a liberating education, there are no universal strategies disintegrated from each social context (Arocho, 2019; Luke, 2012; Freire & Macedo, 1987/2005).

A proposal of promotion of critical awareness through learning that seems pertinent to us is offered by Yoon et al. (2018). This proposal is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Framework of Critical Global Literacies

Dimension	Focus
Developing global awareness with an interconnected world concept	Who we are and how we are situated in the larger world community beyond local and national boundaries
Making connections from a personal to a global level	Diverse texts, including popular media, to which learners can make personal connections to global issues
Analyzing and critiquing texts from global and cross-cultural perspectives	Embracing diverse viewpoints by examining learners' ways of thinking
Promoting social and political actions on global and multicultural issues	Encouraging students to be active participants for social justice and equity

Source: Yoon et al., 2018, p. 3.

For the authors of this text, one way to develop this critical literacy is through the application of participatory action research (PAR) in less traditional learning, and the encouragement of active and critical participation of all stakeholders (Serpa, Ferreira, Santos, & Teixeira, 2018), with the aim "to develop participants' voices and actively involve them in transforming education. They also speak to a broader responsibility that educational research has to influence human development through including elements of participation as opposed to doing research 'on' or 'about' the participants" (Walker & Loots, 2017, p. 168).

4. Conclusion

We live in a society—or if we want to live in societies—characterized by a severe inequality in several dimensions, such as the economic and social ones. As early as 1997, Morrow and Torres very pertinently considered society involved in,

"various processes of fragmentation: —a decentralization and fragmentation of power that puts into question the theories of domination and hegemony; —a disjunction of material interests and subjective expressions in collective action, which results in the demands of social movements moving from questions of distribution to ethical-cultural questions; —the emergence of heterogeneity, opposed to the homogeneity previously characteristic of the world system; —a growing distrust and disillusionment of

democracy, resulting from the fragmentation of communities and political identities" (p. 378).

Consequently, in this article, whose main purpose was to offer a contribution to the discussion of the concept of critical literacy, it seems important to us to bear in mind several implications of this Paulo Freire's central idea:

"literacy cannot be reduced to the treatment of letters and words as purely mechanical domain. We need to go beyond this rigid comprehension of literacy and begin to view it as the relationship of learners to the world, mediated by the transforming practice of this world taking place in the very general milieu in which learners travel (Freire & Macedo, 1987/2005, pp. ix and x).

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