

# Critical Literacy

## Bringing Theory to Praxis

ELIZABETH BISHOP  
*University of Pittsburgh*

LITERACY IS A POLITICAL BATTLEGROUND. As a writer, I approach literacy learning as an activist educator and a cultural studies researcher. To expand the discourse of activist explorations into literacy, this article discusses critical literacy research with the aim of contextualizing out-of-school youth organizing as a potent learning space for critical literacy praxis. To determine what theoretical frameworks, taxonomies and modes of inquiry offered the most potential to successfully execute further study around literacy learning with activist youth, I read widely across the literature on literacy inside and outside of schools. From a survey of the literature across literacy and youth organizing, there are important connections but only limited research on the exercise of critically literate practices in the development of youth as social justice activists (Blackburn & Clark, 2008).

Critical literacy theory and pedagogy is operationalized through understanding and critically engaging with the material economy of the present. Anderson and Irvine (1993) presented an early conceptual platform that looked at critical literacy through cultural studies, writing:

The importance of critical literacy being grounded pedagogically in a politics of difference offers learners, regardless of their particular classed, raced, or gendered subjectivities, opportunities to become 'border crossers.' Critical literacy, then, is learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations. (p. 82)

Youth organizers engage in an activist model of citizenship through grassroots organizing, partnering with other community organizers and conducting research with a focus on social responsibility. This method of social inquiry as activism, where individuals organize for education and justice (Morrell, 2008) posits the space for the construction of sociopolitical and activist identities in youth that support literate practice. The skills exercised when participatory in such projects include working with others to building consensus through collaborative decision-making, interpreting public problems and taking action—while promoting youth efficacy (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2008).

The skills involved in youth activist and organizing pursuits support the construction of sociopolitical activist identities through learning processes focused on social action. Such organizing frequently involved youth-led decisions to engage topics of identity politics and challenge the stereotypes of youth, particularly the negative representations of young women, youth of color, queer youth, and other marginalized groups (Ginwright, 2010). This work is aligned, as I demonstrate below, with many traditions in the history of critical literacy—operationalized in both theory and praxis.

### **Defining Critical Literacy to Become Critically Literate**

In addressing critical literacy we are concerned with the extent to which, and the ways in which, actual and possible social practices and conceptions of reading and writing enable human subjects to understand and engage the politics of daily life in the quest for a more truly democratic social order...referring to critical literacy only where concerted efforts are being made to understand and practice reading and writing in ways that enhance the quest for democratic emancipation. (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. xix)

Critical literacy is built on exploring personal, sociopolitical, economic and intellectual border identities. It dictates a politics of location where learners are positioned to operate as “border crossers” (Anderson & Irvine, 1993). It is also grounded in the ethical imperative to examine the contradictions in society between the meaning of freedom, the demands of social justice, the obligations of citizenship and the structured silence that permeates incidences of suffering in everyday life. It is a kind of literacy about structures, structural violence, and power systems. Critical literacy uses texts and print skills in ways that enable students to examine the politics of daily life within contemporary society with a view to understanding what it means to locate and actively seek out contradictions within modes of life, theories, and substantive intellectual positions.

It is important to maintain deferral in defining critical literacy. Since the 1990s, critical literacy theorists have outlined emancipatory theories of learning (Freire & Macedo, 1987) that addressed the complex relations of language and power through social critique, advocacy, and cultural transformation (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). Educational researchers discuss critical literacy as a theory of social practice, as the negotiation of and the creation of meaning for social justice (Greene, 2008). While there is no single model of critical literacy (as there is no single model of youth organizing), the emphasis on Freire’s (1970) action-reflection cycle of “praxis” has offered participants a concept through which to construct meanings that support their literacy for civic engagement (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

### **Tracing the History of Critical Literacy Theory**

Much of the earliest scholarship on critical literacy is grounded in Freirian pedagogy. In 1987, Freire and Macedo published their expansive volume on literacy and critical pedagogy. In it, they argued that those who are critically literate can not only understand how meaning is socially constructed within texts, but can also come to understand the political and economic contexts in which those texts were created and embedded (Freire & Macedo, 1987). While Freire

and Macedo were perhaps the first to initiate a dialogue around the idea of critical literacy in their collection, it was not until 1993 that Lankshear and McLaren issued what was to become the seminal text devoted to the topic. In it, they stated that literacy is more complex than the traditionally defined skills of reading and writing. Rather, they argued that such a traditional definition of literacy is ideologically aligned with particular postures of normative sociopolitical consciousness that are inherently exploitative. By contrast, critical literacy emphasized the social construction of reading, writing and text production within political contexts of inequitable economic, cultural, political, and institutional structures. Lankshear and McLaren argued for critically reflective teaching and research agendas in the tradition of Street (1984), focused on both the forms that literate skills take as social practices and the uses to which those skills are employed.

Lankshear and McLaren made a strong distinction between critical literacy and Hirsch's (1988) "cultural literacy," the latter of which dictated a particular corpus of knowledge young people were expected to know to be appropriately informed Americans. Critical literacy seriously challenged this notion of propriety and warned against such a "colonization of culture" (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 17). The authors argued that critical literacy is an approach to teaching and learning committed to exploring how and why particular social and cultural groups of persons occupy unequal political positions of access to social structures. Rather than promoting any particular reading of any particular group, critical literacy seeks to interrogate the historical and contemporaneous privileging of and exclusion of groups of people and ideas from mainstream narratives. Throughout their volume, there is a lingering concern for doing critical literacy without falling into a "colonizing logic" or other forms of theoretical imperialism.

The authors did identify three forms of educational practice that critical literacy can take on, varying by their commitment to inquiry and action: liberal education, pluralism, and transformative praxis. Liberal education here means an approach to disciplinary knowledge where intellectual freedom exists and where disparate interpretations are considered, but inevitably contradiction is avoided and rational argumentation wins out. In pluralism, there is an emphasis on reading to evaluate principles that support a loose conception of tolerance. Tolerance here is aligned with a notion of diversity that is grounded on benevolence toward those who are not mainstream (and in the process maintains the mainstream). Against these approaches, the authors forwarded "transformative praxis" as that which takes the radical potential of critical literacy into direct emancipatory action in the world. Praxis is here defined through the Freirian (1970) process of naming the conditions of oppression and struggling collectively with others in a cycle of action-reflection-action against such oppression. Lankshear and McLaren argued that a guiding principle behind the processes of transformative critical literacy praxis involves an analysis "attempting to understand how agents working within established structures of power participate in the social construction of literacies, revealing their political implications" (p. 7).

Critical literacy praxis, which Lankshear and McLaren also called "political and social literacies," involves textual studies that are analyzed at the discursive level in which the texts were created and in which they are sustained. While the authors understood that this move might lead to such literacies being seen as "potentially subversive," they forwarded a key distinction centering on the difference between political indoctrination and the development of a critical consciousness—or what Freire (1970) called "conscientization." They argued that even when students are introduced to texts that might be considered "reactionary," a critical literacy approach involves working with them "to understand the nature and implications of the

ideologies on parade; and in doing so engage students in reflection upon their own ideological investments” (p. 8). This purpose and direction of critical literacy is important because it illuminates the difference between the moralistic position taking of indoctrination and an ethical approach to reading through a critical consciousness that neither moralizes nor normalizes.

In the early 1990s, McLaren and Lankshear were some of the more radical scholars writing on the topic of critical literacy. Around the same time, Apple (1992) published an essay on “the text and cultural politics” which examined the social legitimation of certain knowledge in schools. Making the argument that “no curriculum is neutral” and that the selection and organization of curricular information is necessarily an ideological process, Apple argued that schools, teachers, and students must study the constructed nature of knowledge about institutions and experiences (whose history and knowledge is included in and replicated by curricular texts and operational contexts) in order to reflectively determine if the school functions as a democratic institution and/or as a site of social control.

Illuminating this struggle in their collection on critical teaching and literacy, Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) outlined four approaches to critical teaching and the idea of literacy learning which spanned: functional literacy and the rhetoric of objectivism; interpretive literacy and the politics of nostalgia; expressivism as a literacy for personal growth; and critical literacy. Of these four central approaches, the authors argued that only critical literacy offered the complexity of a sociopolitical framework which foregrounded the study of “the relationships of language and power with practical knowledge of how to use language for advocacy, social critique, and cultural transformation” (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 152). This made critical literacy distinct amongst a variety of approaches to literacy learning that claimed to address the sociocultural while remaining intentionally distant from the political.

Across their collection, Knoblauch and Brannon echoed Street's (1984) concern that the tyranny of academic literacies can serve to socially reproduce dominant ideologies (racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia) that perpetuate forms of injustice. Writing that same year, scholars ranging from Hull (1993) to Comber (1993) were beginning to study the implications for critical literacy learning in schools. Comber (2001) later argued that one of the best ways to approach critical literacy is to begin with multiple sources and opposing views to interrogate their construction by specific individuals with particular (always political) goals.

At the turn of the millennium, just before the 2001 re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as the controversial No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Janks (2000) posited four possible orientations for future approaches to critical literacy education based on different perspectives on the relationship between language and power: (a) to understand how language maintains social and political forms of domination; (b) to provide access to dominant forms of language without compromising the integrity of non-dominant forms; (c) to promote a diversity which requires attention to the way that uses of language create social identities; and (d) to bring a design perspective that emphasizes the need to use and select from a wide range of available cultural sign systems. Although frequently taken in isolation, Janks argued that it is through the interdependence of these approaches that learners can most fully engage theories and pedagogies of critical literacy.

## Contemporary Examples of Critical Literacy Research

Where and how is critical literacy most fully realized? Recent scholarship on critical literacy reified the emphasis on a type of “reading the world” through understanding the social and historical factors influencing social justices and injustices. Across the last decade of research, five overlapping components have been consistently articulated as “core principles” for cycles of critical literacy (Comber & Simpson, 2001), frequently conceived of as the “transformative elements” in critical literacy pedagogy (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002). I have synthesized these concepts from across the literature as: (a) mobilizing learners as social actors with knowledge and skills to disrupt the commonplace; (b) conducting research, analysis and interrogation of multiple viewpoints on an issue; (c) identifying issues focused on sociopolitical realities in the context of the lives of the learners; (d) designing and undertaking actions focused on social justice outside of the classroom; and (e) reflecting upon actions taken and creating vision(s) for future project(s). This taxonomy of critical literacy outlines five tenets that researchers, educators and youth have used across the literature to define their own projects on their own terms.

The major emphasis across various critical literacy projects has been a naming of and a willingness to reflect upon the role that language and texts play in the construction of the self and the social. Provenzo (2005) called it an activist practice to ask questions that critically interrogate, interpret and contextualize the ways in which people can be empowered and disempowered. He argued that all learners should ask questions about who speaks in a culture, who defines literacy and whose knowledge is included in the creation and definition of curricula in learning communities.

In practice, researchers and educators have articulated and studied critical literacy in a host of different ways. Petrone and Gibney (2005) drew on the work of critical literacy theorists to articulate a “democratic pedagogy” in American literature classrooms where students investigate and transform their worlds through an inquiry-based examination of culture and society, to consider what is present, what is missing, and what is possible. For Petrone and Gibney, this approach to teaching literature and intertextuality is about “foregrounding historical, cultural, and social issues” in the interest of supporting the development of critical citizens who seek to expand the possibilities of democratic public life (p. 36). They argued that the English Language Arts curriculum should provide a space for students to deepen their traditional literacy skills while becoming critical and skilled “consumers, producers, and distributors of texts and information” (p. 39).

Singer's (2006) text on “writing and reading to change the world” offered a series of stories of justice told through collaborative writing practices. Using examples inside of schools, Singer studied students writing about stories of injustice, finding an audience and collaborators while writing themselves into activism. In Singer's study, the youth studied models of expository essays about activists while reading Philip Hoose's (2001) text about the influence of youth throughout the history of the social justice movement in the United States. Writing “toward change,” the students were asked: “what does your activist story teach about movement toward making positive social change?” (Singer, 2006, p. 97). As the students selected and executed their culminating projects on issues of activism, Singer noted that the participants became “consumed with the world outside of the school,” becoming experts in activism as well as experts in research literacy (Singer, 2006, p. 112).

That same year, Borshiem and Petrone (2006) published a study about “teaching the research paper for local action” in which they framed classroom-based learning through a consideration of how students engage in critical literacies through the consumption, production, and distribution of texts. As classroom teachers, the authors introduced a research paper unit that focused on social action locally to provide students with an opportunity to critically investigate their contexts and respond through the production of texts promoting positive social change. Echoing Freire and Macedo (1987), they called for individuals to make “meaningful” observations about their contexts – in this case, their schools. Individually, students were asked to follow a research cycle that followed five steps: (a) develop community-based topics to learn more about them or seek to change them; (b) conduct primary as well as secondary research, including interviews, observations, and surveys; (c) write a traditional academic research paper; (d) produce a “real” research text (e.g. documentary, newspaper article, etc.); and (e) distribute their text to real audiences to help raise awareness about or change some aspect of their school or community (Borsheim & Petrone, 2006, p. 79). The authors spoke of the commitment, curiosity, and motivation necessary for students to see themselves as researchers who can exact “real” change in their school or community context.

One interesting finding to emerge from this study was that students reported the research project process was a positive experience that filled the void of traditional research papers in school (lack of voice, purpose, or audience). By identifying issues and constructing research rooted in their everyday lives, the youth remained engaged in a literate process of contextualized inquiry and research. Students secured interviews with executives and political figures in their community, and reported feeling like “real citizens” (p. 82). Borsheim and Petrone also wrote that many positive results were unanticipated, such as shifts in “attitudes, ownership, community involvement, and oral and written communication” (p. 82). There is much to explore here in relation to the relevance of the unanticipated, including a continued interrogation of the definitions of citizenship.

More recently, Phelps (2010) argued that there are uses in applying critical literacy to the non-fiction study of cultural and ideological diversity, focusing particularly on learning about Islam in America. Phelps demonstrated how critical literacy is used to debunk stereotypical and harmful representations by introducing sociopolitical dimensions. By acknowledging that the ideological foundations of knowledge, culture, and identity are always political, Phelps argued that a critical literacy lens helps to reveal the social functions of texts in positioning individuals and groups of people (p. 191). Echoing the distinctions between critical teaching and critical literacy, Phelps replicated Cervetti, Pardales and Damico (2001)’s model of critical literacy that disrupted the commonplace to focus on sociopolitical issues, to develop more nuanced views on complex contemporary topics and take action to promote social justice. Citing the work of Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison and Vasquez (1999), Phelps argued that “doing critical literacy” in classrooms involves guiding learners to ask certain kinds of questions when engaging with any texts, such as: what is the purpose of the text? How does the text try to position the reader? How does the text construct reality? Whose interests are or are not served by the ideas in the text? What worldviews are or are not represented?

## Limitations to Critical Literacy Projects in Schools

In search of practical applications of critical literacy, Behrman (2006) conducted a review of the research on classroom practices that support critical literacy. Attempting to identify and locate teaching and learning strategies consistent with critical literacy, Behrman cited an immediate problem: critical literacy is frequently described in the research literature as a theory with practical implication rather than an instructional method. Arguably, it is both and neither. While Behrman argued that such conceptions lack consistent application, he acknowledged that critical literacy authors such as Luke (2000) have intentionally resisted the development of any narrow methodology that claimed to formulaically enact critical literacy (while nevertheless replicating certain approaches).

Citing the democratizing values of bringing critical literacy from theory into practice, Behrman catalogued a list of common practices, articulated in six broad categories for critical literacy learning tasks: (a) reading supplementary texts; (b) reading multiple texts; (c) reading from a resistant perspective; (d) producing counter-texts; (e) conducting student-choice research projects; and (f) taking social action. Noting that the “social action” projects can produce unsatisfactory results despite the best intentions, Behrman found that the goals of critical literacy (detailed through an emphasis on democratization and social justice in the classroom) are not reflected in the hierarchical relations through which the classroom traditionally functions. As such, he argued that no pedagogy that presumes a hierarchical relationship can support the development of critical literacy learning.

In her foreword to Lankshear and McLaren’s (1993) critical text, Maxine Greene called for a pedagogy that emphasized personal and social transformation beyond mere identification with dominant social codes. At that time, Greene contended that the postmodern emphasis on discourse, textuality, difference, and the structures of power should promote action-oriented dialogues around problems of oppression, equality, and justice. Yet time and again, postmodern scholars and their critics alike have articulated the tragic fault of critical literacy, naming the context of formal schooling as a limitation hindering social action. Although not always true, the overwhelming obstacle to critical literacy in schools has been the failure to put principle to practice, to fully enact models of critical literacy learning through activist actions in authentic spaces that extend outside of the classroom.

Since its entrance into educational theoretical parlance, critical literacy (like its relative critical theory) has been displaced and dislocated. It has been dismissed as being anything from too pedagogically loose of a model to too politically activist of a model (Freesmith, 2006; Luke & Dooley, 2007). As early as 1999, critical literacy scholars Comber and Nixon (1999) noted that literacy practices inside schools primarily function to sustain dominant cultural norms and ideologies. Even Borsheim and Petrone (2006) acknowledged that, “because of the nature of critical research, students are likely to ask questions that some people prefer they not ask about topics that some people prefer they not address” (p. 82). The focus on reflection and the examination of immediate context and internal constructions proved to be the most threatening aspect of critical literacy learning. Even when students considered sociopolitical, cultural, and ideological issues that could lead to possible action steps, they frequently did not take action if they were not explicitly supported to do so (Phelps, 2010).

While critical literacy has historically been theorized within classroom spaces (Comber & Simpson, 2001; McDaniel, 2006) and researched as a conceptualization of particular operations of curricula inside schools, the central purpose and function of critical literacy praxis had been

articulated as an assessment of texts in order to understand, uncover, and/or alter relationships of power and domination both inside and outside of formal educational contexts (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Hull, 1993; Morrell, 2004). Yet, despite being theorized as an emancipatory theory of learning, researchers have consistently demonstrated that critical literacy is limited when attempting to take social action to redress political inequities and injustices within the context of school-based literacy curricula. This limitation is both systemic and diffuse, and points directly to the question: where can critical literacy learning be authentically exercised?

In 2007, Blackburn and Clark published their collection on “literacy research for political action and social change.” In it, they identified the need to take critical reading and text production outside of the classroom and into activist spaces with youth to engage their immediate needs for social change through political action that is not regulated by school-based interests. The authors argued that future literacy research must engage methodologies that foreground the immediate needs of participants, particularly focused on tackling the connections between the local and the global in literacy research for political action. They contended that such research creates kinetic connections beyond the local through a focus on the social practice of collaborative, collective engagement with the texts and context of activism.

### **Lessons on the Actionable Elements of Critical Literacy Praxis**

The limitations to conducting critical literacy in classrooms have numerous implications. For some educators and youth, the lack of support to enact “social action” projects out of classroom-based curricula results in either a reticence to engage in such work, or a fear of the implications for doing so extra-institutionally. Even in conversation with some researchers, it is easy to trace a sense of defeat in conducting deep critical literacy work to examine social and political injustices and inequities. For many, such outlooks are valid and confirmed by experience. Yet as researchers, we overlook the important question of context when assessing where to engage critical literacy praxis.

Lankshear and McLaren argued two decades ago that in order to continue conducting critical literacy research, scholars need to conduct research that: has historical function; approaches the process of becoming literate as more than simply becoming rational; takes an oppositional stance toward privileged groups; seeks means toward political empowerment; supports multiple literacies; and counters the essentialization of difference. The authors argued that the most serious issues confronting literacy researchers was to create and participate in studies that accounted for the subjectivity of individuals while maintaining a fight for social justice:

We must maintain recognition of the materiality of the sign as a product of social forces and relations of power, as a lived embodiment of both oppression and possibility, subordination and emancipation; in the final analysis, we must reject any notion of the human subject which seals itself off from its own history, its own link to the community of multiple selves which surrounds it, its narratives of freedom; to construct a truly critical literacy, we need to make despair less salutary and economic, social, racial, and gender equality politically conceivable and pedagogically possible. (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 415)



Arguably one of the most prominent contemporary critical literacy scholars, Ernest Morrell foregrounded his early work (2004) in a cultural studies epistemology where the historical, social, economic, and cultural contexts of urban youth are ethnographically explored. He approached critical literacy with an emphasis on situated learning (Morrell, 2004). Here, learning is defined as changing participation in relevant sociocultural activity over a period of time as one is apprenticed into activist practice.

Across his corpus, Morrell frequently posits critical literacy as a “critical theory of literacy” overtly aimed at social and political change (2004, 2007, 2008). Morrell's 2004 study apprenticing youth as critical researchers of popular culture was designed around core components of critical literacy work with youth that would “capture literacy events that demonstrate academic mastery and critical consciousness” (p. 8). At that time, Morrell (2004) designated the tenets of critical literacy as:

The ability to challenge existing power relations in texts and to produce new texts that delegitimize these relations; a consciousness of the relationship between the dominant culture's use of language, literacy and social injustice; the ability not only to read words but to read the world into and onto texts and recognize the correlation between the word and the world; and the ability to create political texts that inspire transformative action and conscious reflection. (p. 57)

Morrell's research frequently focused on the ways in which young people come to know and adhere to socially sanctioned ways of speaking and acting without being subsumed into oppressive relations. Morrell argued in his 2004 critical ethnography that the urban literacy classroom is an ideal context for critical literacy learning that engages students personally and as citizens actively transforming their sociopolitical world. The findings of the 2004 study demonstrated that critical literacy projects could produce proficiency in academic and other literacies, where student-researchers began to value popular cultural knowledge as well as academic content while developing their skills with the tools of investigation, inquiry, analysis and text production. His project demonstrates the need for the further study of organizing projects geared toward engaging youth as “critical citizens” through critical literacy.

In Blackburn and Clark's (2007) collection, Morrell (2007) discussed critical literacy and popular culture in urban education “toward a pedagogy of access and dissent.” In that chapter, he contended that engaging in critical literacy involves the consumption, production, and distribution of print and new media texts by, with, and on behalf of marginalized populations in the interests of naming, exposing, and destabilizing power relations while promoting individual freedom and expression. Citing Hull (1993), Morrell (2007) argued that critical literacy is the ability to not only read and write, but also to assess textual relationships between power and domination.

The classroom-based limitation yet lingers here amidst an actionable optimism. Beck (2005) wrote in search of a “place” for critical literacy in schools. Locating critical literacy as a movement drawn out of a cultural studies tradition aimed at transforming social inequity, Beck warned against placing issues of power and difference at the foreground of classroom conversations. Connected as it is to the attitude of questioning the social, political, and economic conditions under which texts were constructed, Beck wrote that critical literacy learning involves students examining the reproduction of inequality and injustice, while gaining a critical consciousness to participate in and transform their social worlds. Studying the use of critical

literacy learning practices in an all-male maximum-security facility in Canada, Beck concluded that it is not a good idea to teach critical literacy in settings where silence is encouraged, such as prisons and schools.

### **Approaching Critical Literacy through Youth Organizing**

Janks (2000) defined critical literacy as multiple, as skill and social practice that is both embodied and shifting. She argued that there is an on-going socio-historical imperative for critical literacy learning that positions identity investment and the constitution of subjectivities within complex, multimodal, inter-textual social spaces. She highlighted this notion of critical literacy as both a shifting skill set and embodied social practices that function through the interdependent negotiation of pedagogical domination, diversity, access and design.

Such negotiations are central when considering the constraints to critical literacy inside of schools based on structural and institutional limitations. The tension between school-based literacy acquisition and critical language awareness (Dozier, Johnston & Rogers, 2006) points toward the need to create and support out-of-school spaces for the development of critical literacy practices that counteract the normalization of inequity and the privileging of academic literacy. Doing so supports learners to engage alternative literacies as powerful everyday practices that generate critical social thought and action. This is not to say that literacy skills cannot be developed. Rather, this points to the questions that I have raised throughout: where, when and under what conditions can critical literacy learning be more fully realized for young people?

As if in answer to the challenge of conducting critical literacy learning inside school spaces, the field of youth organizing emerged over the past decade as an exemplar alternative space for critical literacy to be enacted outside of schools (Ginwright, 2010). These spaces support youth engagement in activism as a process, making social and political change in many ways that align to the working conception of critical literacy praxis that has been outlined throughout this chapter. Specifically, taking critical reading and text production outside of school and into activist spaces with youth engages their immediate needs (Blackburn & Clark, 2007).

The theories and practices of critical literacy are prevalent throughout the literature on youth organizing although the taxonomy has not been overtly named in the research. Youth organizing is a relatively new field of research, a hybrid space that is activist in content and that actively resists co-optation. Obviously, youth community organizing and social activism have a long history well before either concept was even considered a “field” for study. In brief, the contemporary study of youth organizing is an extension of positive youth development, situated in the crux between traditional youth development, youth leadership and community organizing (Ginwright, 2010). The study of youth organizing and activism emerged out of the field of youth development, built on a foundation of an analysis of power and inequity. In organizing programs, such processes are learned through the practice and acquisition of skills necessary to pursue policy and social change, from lobbying and campaigning to taking direct action (Torres-Fleming, Valdes & Pillai, 2010).

As a context for critical education, youth organizing projects take on critical literacy through four central components: (a) youth identify community issues for thematic investigation; (b) they participate in and conduct social movement history and political education workshops; (c) community organizing and media trainings; and (d) campaign development, outreach, action

and reflection. However, what is not yet well defined are the literacy-related skills and outcomes of this community-based work.

Defining the parameters of critical literacy is intentionally challenging—and is thus well suited for the task of understanding the dynamic learning models of urban youth organizing without dictating the parameters for future projects. Emerging from these insights, as well as from an ethical and political commitment to democratic and emancipatory forms of educating alongside youth, it is imperative for critical literacy researchers to foreground the language of activist learning as political and historical. By focusing on instantiations of critical literacy praxis that demonstrate critical consciousness, inter-subjective re-imaginings and articulations of becoming, youth organizing is an ideal frontier for enacting positive social change work with young people. In the process, the deep skills of critical literacy can be honored, supported, expanded and re-visioned to allow deep individual and collective development. More research is needed to understand the function and operation of critical literacy in the context of organizing, such that supports powerful learning beyond school walls.

### References

- Anderson, G. L., & Irvine, P. (1993). Informing critical literacy with ethnography. In C. Lankshear & P. L. McLaren, (Eds.) *Critical literacy: Politics, praxis, and the postmodern* (pp. 81-104). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Apple, M. (1992). The text and cultural politics. *Educational Researcher*, 5, 4-11.
- Beck, A. S. (2005). A place for critical literacy. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48(5), February 2005, 392-400.
- Behrman, E. H. (2006). Teaching about language, power, and text: A review of classroom practices that support critical literacy. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49(6), March 2006, 490-498.
- Blackburn, M. V. & Clark, C.T. (2007). *Literacy research for political action and social change*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Borshiem, C., & Petrone, R. (2006). Teaching the research paper for local action. *The English Journal*, 95(4), 78-83.
- Cervetti, G., Pardales, M., & Damico, J. (2001). A tale of differences: Comparing the traditions, perspectives, and educational goals of critical reading and critical literacy. *Reading Online*, 4(4).
- Comber, B. (1993). *Classroom explorations in critical literacy*. The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 16(1), 73-83.
- Comber, B., & Nixon, H. (1999) Literacy education as a site for social justice: what do our practices do? In C. Edelsky (Ed.), *Making justice our project: Teachers working toward critical whole language practice* (pp. 316-351). Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Comber, B. (2001). Negotiating critical literacies. *School Talk* 6(3), 1-2.
- Comber, B., & Simpson, A. (2001). (Eds.) *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dozier, C., Johnston P., & Rogers, R. (2006). *Critical literacy/critical teaching: Tools for preparing responsive teachers*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Freemith, D. (2006). The politics of the English curriculum: Ideology in the campaign against critical literacy in *The Australian*. *English in Australia*, 41(1), 25-30.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garve.
- Ginwright, S. (2010). *Building a pipeline for justice: Understanding youth organizing and the leadership pipeline*. Occasional Paper Series , no. 10. New York: Funder's Collaborative on Youth Organizing.
- Greene, S, ed. (2008). *Literacy as a civil right: Reclaiming social justice in literacy teaching and learning*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Hirsch, E.D. (1988). *Cultural literacy: What every American needs to know*. New York: Vintage.
- Hoose, P. (2001) *It's our world, too! Young people who are making a difference*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hull, G. (1993). Critical literacy and beyond: Lessons learned from students and workers in a vocational program and on the job. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 24(4), 308-317.
- Janks, H. (2000). Domination, access, diversity, and design: A synthesis for critical literacy education. *Educational Review*, 52, 175-186.
- Knoblauch, C. H. & Brannon, L. (1993). *Critical teaching and the idea of literacy*. Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH.
- Lankshear, C. & McClaren, P., eds. (1993). *Critical literacy: Radical and postmodernist perspectives*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Lankshear, C. (1994). Critical literacy (Occasional Paper No. 3). Belconnen, Australian Capital Territory: Australian Curriculum Studies Association.
- Leland, C., Harste, J., Ociepka, A., Lewison, M., & Vasquez, V. (1999). Exploring critical literacy: You can hear a pin drop. *Language Arts*, 77(1), 70-78.
- Lewison, M., Flint, A.S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts* 79(5), 382-392.
- Luke, A. (2000). Critical literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43(5), 448-461.
- Luke, A. & Dooley, K. (2007). Critical literacy and second language In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (Vol II). New York: Routledge.
- McDaniel, C. (2006). *Critical literacy: A way of thinking, a way of life*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Morrell, E. (2004). *Becoming critical researchers: Literacy and empowerment for urban youth*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Morrell, E. (2007). Critical literacy and popular culture in urban education: Toward a pedagogy of access and dissent. In C. Clark and M. Blackburn (Eds.). *Working With/in the Local: New Directions in Literacy Research for Political Action*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Morrell, E. (2008). *Critical literacy and urban youth: Pedagogies of access, dissent, and liberation*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- O'Donoghue, J. & Kirshner, B. (2008). "Engaging urban youth in civic practice: Community-based youth organizations as alternative sites for democratic education." In Bixby, J. S. & Pace, J. L., eds. *Educating democratic citizens in troubled times: Qualitative studies of current efforts*. (pp. 227-251). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

- Petrone, R. & Gibney, R. (2005). The power to speak and listen: Democratic pedagogies for American Literature Classrooms. *The English Journal*. 94(5), 35-39.
- Phelps, S. (2010). Critical literacy: Using nonfiction to learn about Islam. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 54(3), pp 190-198.
- Provenzo, Jr., E.F. (2005). *Critical literacy: What every educated American ought to know*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishing.
- Singer, J. (2006). *Stirring up justice: Writing & reading to change the world*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

