

# Literature in the classroom: How Literature Can Help to Create Critical Consciousness.

Fernanda Ribeiro Valesan

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Pedagogy, Universidade Federal da Fronteira Sul in Chapecó, Santa Catarina, Brazil, fevalesan@gmail.com

**Abstract.** The idea of critical consciousness was majorly explored by Paulo Freire, one of the most important educators of the 20th century. Since then there have been studies showing various pedagogical strategies to use in the classroom that can create critical consciousness. Using literature in the classroom is one of these strategies that can provide critical consciousness and critical literacy because creates meaningful and important connections with the students while showing the social importance of reading and writing. This brief overview about the subject uses qualitative methods to show the current state of the literature about the impact of using literature in the classrooms and brings a two (2) relevant examples. The database used was Google Academics where two (2) master's theses and one (1) article relevant to this research were selected. This research concludes that literature is an important tool in the classroom to question and reflect the reality lived creating critical consciousness and critical literacy.

**Keywords.** Critical consciousness; Critical literacy; Paulo Freire; Literature

## 1. Introduction

The ability to look at our society's injustices and think about them critically is the essence of Critical Consciousness, and even though it is a very challenging ability to work and develop in classrooms, it has to be prioritized so the students can relate the work and discussions done in classes with the discussions and the work that needs to be done in our society.

Paulo Freire's work in Brazil shows how the inability to read and write critically can affect a person's ability to look at the injustices of the world critically, that's why for him the ability to read and write was more than decode letters and sounds, it was a form of liberation, that when done properly can provide the construction of critical consciousness and critical literacy.

The construction of critical consciousness during classes doesn't have only one way to be achieved, but it has several strategies reported in studies, one of these strategies is the use of literature to engage students, making them confront their worldviews and reflect different aspects of the society they live when reading literature.

The use of literature during classes can make the students create connections between what they are

reading and their life experiences, it can also make them feel represented by the story being read, creating a sense of identity.

That's why this study aims to explain the importance of creating critical consciousness and critical literacy during classes, the relevance of using literature during classes and how to use it to create critical consciousness and critical literacy.

## 2. Methodology

A qualitative research was conducted to investigate the impact of using literature in the process of creating critical consciousness and critical literacy, this methodology was chosen so it was possible to select valuable experiences where literature was used in the classroom.

The research was conducted in google academics using the following search strings "literature"; "school"; "language arts"; "critical literacy" and "critical consciousness", reviewed the articles and master's theses of the last 3 years, and included the ones that brought a clear and effective report of the methodology used in the classrooms.

## 3. Concepts

Before evaluate the methods used in classrooms to create critical consciousness and critical literacy with the help of literature it is important to clarify

the concept of critical consciousness and critical literacy, and why they are important aspects of an critical pedagogy.

### 3.1 Critical consciousness

One of the most important educators of the 20th century, Paulo Freire, introduced the term critical consciousness during one experiment to teach literacy to poor labourers in Brazilian northernmost. To him, illiteracy, the inability to read and write critically, was a political problem that not only prevented people's ability to improve their social condition in life but also changed their perception of reality, the understanding of their conditions and the causes of it.

Critical consciousness can help to understand, analyse and think critically about the different kinds of oppressions lived, that's why critical consciousness is one of the most important skills students must learn at school, being the skill to "draw lines between their conditions and societal structures or systems and then take action against those systems" (MOBERG, 2022, p.12).

To Freire the ability to read and write was more the decoding sounds and letters of the alphabet, to him the success of this process also depended on the ability to comprehend what was being read, and how that related with our life experiences, for him the process of reading and writing also depend of reading the world.

In education, critical consciousness is a form of libertarian education, that includes the dialogue with the oppressed, since there is no one better than the oppressed to realize their oppression, question and take action against it, for Freire:

"Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation. The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality." (FREIRE, 1970, p.65)

This means that the pedagogy Freire advocated for should be based on the open dialogue between teachers and students, this pedagogy can provide liberation with the oppressed and the construction of critical consciousness, this does not have a single education theory or methodology, but it has different approaches that can help to achieve it.

The next topics in this literature review looks at the concept of critical literacy and different strategies to achieve critical consciousness and critical literacy in the classroom, more specifically, how the use of literature during classes can provide the construction of critical consciousness and critical literacy.

## 3.2 Critical Literacy

The idea of critical literacy has roots in Paulo Freire's idea of critical pedagogy and the development of critical consciousness, which includes the unveiling of our social system and all classism, racism and sexism existent in it, so "Pedagogical work grounded in this perspectives uncover messages about race, class, and gender in picture books and popular culture with youth in early childhood classrooms" (Schieble, M., Vetter, A., & Martin, K. M., 2020, p.16)

So, during classes, techniques of critical pedagogy and critical literacy must rethink the traditional hierarchy present in many traditional classrooms. The traditional pedagogy that is based on the teacher as the centre of the classroom, as the holder of all knowledge, is what Freire called the "banking model" and is the opposite of critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy is based on a problem-posing education that "asserts that reality is constructed through active collaboration between teacher and student" (MOBERG, 2022) and makes students, and teachers, question our society's structures and think about how to change it. In a way, this changes the teacher's position as the holder of the knowledge in the classroom and makes both parts (teacher and student) collaborate to rethink reality.

Critical literacy see how reading and writing are complex cultural products that humankind uses to relate and represent the world. Therefore in this process, we must learn more than simply decode letters, syllabi and sounds, we must think critically about what is written, and we have to be able to interpret, analyse and question the ideas of the text.

This idea can change the reading experience response since the "student will have a better understanding of the author and their position in relation to the world and themselves. Students become critics and meaning makers themselves" (ALLEN, 2021, p.15), what makes them the protagonists of the learning process, and also provides, deeply comprehension of the text, makes possible to the reader to unravel the ideologies present in it and view the author's topic in different ways, which humanizes the reader and provides a critical inquiry experience.

The next topics in this literature review looks at different strategies to achieve critical consciousness and critical literacy in classes, more specifically, how the use of literature during these classes can provide the construction of critical consciousness.

### 3.3 Use of literature to improve critical literacy and critical consciousness

Literature is an important tool to promote critical consciousness and critical literacy since it can create meaningful and emotional responses while showing

the social importance of reading and writing. A literary text can function as a mirror that shows cultural and emotional similarities and differences connecting with the reader in deeper levels and helping to create a strong sense of identity. That's why this part of this literature review is going to analyse a few strategies for using literature to create in classrooms a place that can promote a connection and a critical reading of the texts.

According to Benjamin Moberg of Hamline University, one of "The most common approach to increasing critical consciousness with regard to literature is to include more multicultural texts" (Moberg, p.20). He invokes a Bishop phrase, saying that the literary text could function as "windows mirrors and sliding glass doors" (Moberg, p.20).

The literary text can reflect the different experiences of the students, creating cross-cultural connections and a strong sense of identity. This is important because literature that oppresses not only doesn't create connections but also can destroy the academic identities of the students. When multicultural texts are brought to classes the students can see characters similar to them, helping them to understand how those text represents and are connected with their lives and also helping them to find and understand their position in the world.

This approach includes getting to know the students, the social and historical position they assume, and bringing texts that speak with them and with their realities. This strategy is deeply connected with Paulo Freire's philosophy of critical pedagogy because rethinks the traditional hierarchy of a classroom and puts the student as the centre of the process.

One very good example of the use of this strategy is in the article "Teaching Resistance with Young Adult Literature: Critical Conversations about Internment" where the authors, Jennifer L. Martin of the University of Illinois at Springfield and Julie Wasmund Hoffman from the Springfield Public Schools used Young adult literature to teach resistance in the classroom, the Young adult literature chosen by them was the novel Internment written by Samira Ahmed, the story is told by the point of view of a young Muslim girl in an American high school, according to them they chose this novel because "students who are marginalized need to see themselves reflected within texts—as in a mirror. The curriculum must reflect their voices, cultures, and ideas." (Martin and Hoffman 2021)

Even though one of the authors found some resistance from the other teachers who thought the book was "too political" for classes, once introduced in her urban middle school classroom, she had positive responses from the students who felt represented by the novel and could understand the struggles and the social injustice that the character was facing.

Another strategy for using literature in classroom is to question the position of the author and what was written, that is called reading against the text. So instead of avoiding problematic texts in the classroom, these would be brought so the teacher and the students could argue, question and think about what the author is defending, what position he is taking, and why it's problematic.

That strategy goes the opposite way of what we see in many classrooms of reading with the text, because even though reading with the text provides students with "develop skills related to reading comprehension, identifying literary devices, analyzing for theme, and so forth" (Moberg, p.21) it does not question the power structures of our society, and how it may affect the author and what is being written.

That's why reading against the text has many advantages because it provides the students with reading comprehension skills but also allows them to see "new ways of thinking about the text and how it has shaped and been shaped by history and ideology" (Moberg, p.22).

Reading against the text can also include reviewing and questioning the literature chosen by the curriculum, why those authors are relevant and why they were chosen instead of others, this is a way to question what our society thinks is culture-relevant and why some authors have more prestige than others.

A way of achieving this goal of reading "against" the text is using provocative questions, that make the student rethink what they had read, the political views expressed in the text and how he, the reader, agrees or disagrees with what he had read, the research "Fiction and Nonfiction Literature Used to Build Students' Critical Consciousness: Critical Literacy Pedagogy in the Classroom" written by Nicole Allen of the California State University bring some examples of questions that can help to invoke the practice of reading with a critical stance, such as:

"-Whose viewpoint is expressed?"

-What does the author want us to think?

-Whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted?

-How might alternative perspectives be represented?

-How would that contribute to your understanding of the text from a critical stance?" (Allen, 2021, p.34)

This approach also provides the opportunity for the reader to think about their response to the text, and how their identity changes their understatement of the text, therefore the student has to have the opportunity to analyse more than the literary elements, this is a way of studying the texts that question the positions of power that structure our

society, creating critical consciousness and following Paulo Freire's pedagogy.

#### 4. Conclusions

The process of researching and writing this literature review founded evidence that the process of promoting a space favourable to the development of critical consciousness and critical literacy is complex and demanding, but very necessary to create critical individuals who will understand, analyse and think critically about the various forms of oppression that exist.

In education, there are various forms and pedagogical techniques used to achieve the goal of a classroom capable of dialogue with the students, listening to them and helping them to create critical consciousness and critical literacy, one of these ways is to use literature, that can create meaningful and emotional responses, creating a strong sense of identity and showing new ways of look to our society while bringing the social importance of reading and writing.

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