

Theoretical and Practical Understandings of Critical Literacy 1

1 Introduction

Based on our collective research on critical literacy and teacher preparation over the last decade (Guerrettaz et al., 2022; Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020; Sotirovska & Vaughn, 2022ab, 2023; Vaughn, 2015; Vaughn & Kuby, 2019), in this Element, we contribute with theoretical and pedagogical approaches to advance teacher education practices to develop critically oriented teacher candidates. This Element is organized into ten sections. We start this discussion with a popular classroom text, *Skippyjon Jones* (Schachner, 2007), and highlight the importance of critical literacy in preparing pre-service teachers for today's classroom realities as the school-going population is becoming increasingly more diverse (see Section 2). To do this, we define critical literacy in the context of teacher education (see Section 3), discuss our key findings from multiple studies on critical literacy we conducted over the last several years (see Section 4), and emphasize the importance of reflective practice (see Sections 5 and 6), visioning (see Section 7), and autoethnographic methods (see Section 8) in developing critically minded educators. We also present supporting resources in the form of guiding questions for curriculum adaptations (Tables 4 and 5), case study examples from our teaching experiences (Sections 6 and 9), prompts for teacher reflection (Section 9), and an extensive list of children's and young adult literature to support critical literacy practices in teacher education and K-12 classrooms (see Appendix).

From our collective research in critical literacy, we introduce a critical literacy framework and eleven Critical Literacy Beliefs Survey (CLBS) actionable tenets that teacher educators can implement in their courses. Further, we list activities, strategies, and children's and young adult literature examples (see Section 9) that underscore these practices. We also discuss key concepts of critical literacy based on the four Lewison et al.'s (2002) critical literacy dimensions (disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice) and further engage with each dimension by adding questions for text analysis. Specifically, we share findings from our research study where we explored critical literacy as a construct and piloted a survey instrument (CLBS) modeled on Lewison et al.'s (2002) critical literacy framework. Moreover, we reflect on findings from a qualitative study about pre-service teachers' critical literacy beliefs to examine how the critical literacy framework (Lewison et al., 2002), can be operationalized through survey items representative of each dimension. These items were tested with a sample of pre-service teachers ($N=405$) and eleven tenets of critical literacy were deduced for teacher education practice. Based on these findings, we illustrate how these tenets can

be actualized with children's literature through classroom examples. We also present case studies from our critical literacy research that bridge critical literacy theory with teaching practice to support ways for teacher educators to implement reading supports that are equitable, responsive, and representative of students' experiences with schooling. Building from the survey findings, pre-service teacher interviews, and critical literacy framework (Lewison et al., 2002), we outline the role of adaptability in cultivating a critically oriented mindset in teacher candidates with deliberate attention to pedagogical practices. This section explores different modes of research such as autoethnography and visioning as valuable tools in working to orient and foster critically minded teacher candidates within teacher education programs. To conclude (see Section 10), we comment on materials and resources that can be used to engage teacher candidates with critical concepts.

2 Supporting Critical Literacy Practices through Children's Literature: Examples from Teacher Education Classrooms

During a recent observation, Mandy (pseudonym), a White, European American graduate student who had previously taught for nearly a decade as a public school teacher, began her read aloud of *Skippyjon Jones* (Schachner, 2007) during a writing methods course in a teacher preparation program at a public, land grant university in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. The picture book, which hosts the main character, Skippyjon, a Siamese cat who thinks he is a Chihuahua, and who speaks mock Spanish, presents numerous stereotypes of Latinx peoples (Martínez-Roldán, 2013). With the exaggerated anthropomorphic characters that mimic the sound of the Spanish language through stereotypical representations (Martínez-Roldán, 2016), such texts depict misrepresentations of the Latinx culture, language, and ways of being (Rodríguez et al., 2021).

One student who described himself as being Mexican American explained "I feel like that book is making fun of me" (Senta, 2014, p. 55). However, this series was espoused as a model text during the teacher preparation writing methods class. As Janks (2000, 2010) has explicitly argued, language choice matters in how learners construct their identities; using mock narratives that perpetuate stereotypes exacerbates efforts to cultivate socially just and equitable learning environments. With the advance of many culturally relevant and engaging children's literature texts available (Campagnaro et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2021), we wondered why such texts and practices inadvertently find their way into so many teacher preparation programs and what could be done to better support the development of critically oriented teacher candidates.

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Unfortunately, we see many of these practices across the literature and in our research with teachers in schools, especially concerning the children's literature teachers use to teach literacy. For example, in two critical content analyses of children's literature depicting diversities (Gultekin & May, 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2021), researchers found that children's literature holds the potential to both perpetuate and challenge stereotypes of underrepresented children. As Gultekin and May (2020) argue that even award-winning books from established authors may convey outdated and inaccurate perspectives on historically underrepresented groups, which can magnify and/or minimize stereotypes and tropes about them. In their research, Gultekin and May (2020) found that Middle Eastern Muslim depictions in children's literature portrayed predominantly displaced protagonists from underdeveloped rural areas, which may lead to overgeneralization and stereotyping of the people from the Middle East without the complexities, geographical nuances, and diversities of their lived experiences. For example, the authors point out that one such example is *Mirror* (Baker, 2010) where two families are being compared, one in Valley of the Roses, Morocco and another one in Sydney, Australia. Gultekin and May (2020) find this text problematic because it compares two distinct lifestyles of the family living in the rural village of Valley of Roses, depicted tending to livestock, riding a donkey, and cooking in a clay oven, to that of a family living in a large metropolitan city, depicted working on a laptop, using modern kitchen appliances, and driving cars. The researchers explain that more adequate comparisons could have been made if the author had chosen "Morocco's Casablanca, with its metropolitan area population of 6.9 million ... [as] a more suitable location to compare with Sydney, Australia" (Gultekin & May, 2020, p. 632). Like this, Dahlen (2021) argues that representation is not the ultimate goal of inclusive children's literature, but it is the accuracy, authenticity, and diversity in the portrayal of cultures, identities, and geographies across human histories. Hence, reading globally (Short, 2019) without a critical lens may limit readers' understandings and perpetuate monolithic views of these human diversities.

Though efforts have been made to stop the printing of books that convey reductionist stereotypes, many teachers still consider these books as strong examples of children's literature (Pratt, 2021). For example, Nel (2014) and Ishizuka (2019) explored how popular Dr. Seuss titles and adjacent works (comics, caricatures, and other illustrated works) contribute to harmful stereotyping of underrepresented groups. For example, the popular picture books, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (Seuss, 1937) and *If I Ran the Zoo* (Seuss, 1950) are replete with tokenisms and exaggerated racial characteristics (Ishizuka, 2019). These tokens, for example, feature a racialized interpretation

of East Asian and Middle Eastern characteristics, such as that of a man's turban in *If I Ran the Zoo*, which is caricatured by a White protagonist who bemuses about putting the man wearing a turban in a zoo. The depictions of Indigenous Native Americans in *Little House on the Prairie* (Wilder, 1935) have been criticized for the negative and reductionist portrayals (Smulders, 2002), a harmful phenomenon prevalent in other more recently published books, such as *The Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks, 2010), where an Indigenous Native American toy character is referred to as the "Indian" and *Alvin Ho* (Look, 2010), where Indigenous cultural emblems are misappropriated and presented as a Halloween costume rather than a traditional garb.

Given these portrayals, critical scholars emphasize the need for culturally accurate and authentic narratives as a pathway for readers to understand themselves, others, and the world (Bishop, 1990). Specifically, with the focus on accountability, student activism, and culturally responsive curricula, pre-service teachers are of a particular demographic that has been called to address ways to support equitable representation and practices in schooling through children's literature (Short, 2019). Ghiso et al. (2013) remind us that "Supporting our university students to better understand, learn from, and advocate for the multiple literacies of their students calls for a different orientation to 'accountability'" (p. 52). Fostering these critical orientations in pre-service teachers requires a step-by-step approach beginning in teacher preparation. For example, Lee (2020) shared *Visiting Day* (Woodson, 2002) with a group of pre-service teachers, which is a picture book about how a young girl and her grandmother prepare to visit the girl's father in prison. Lee applied Lewison et al.'s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy as a lens through which pre-service teachers analyzed *Visiting Day* to understand how each dimension added a new layer of meaning to the book connecting it to larger social contexts, such as raising awareness of the varying family and school realities of children. After, to bridge the teacher preparation classroom with pre-service teachers' praxis, the pre-service teachers read *Maddi's Fridge* (Brandt & Vogel, 2014), a picture book about the disparaging socioeconomic realities of two best friends Sofia and Maddi with a group of elementary fourth grade students. The pre-service teachers applied the same critical literacy framework to engage the students in critical discussions about poverty. This study shows how pre-service teachers can develop a repertoire of reading supports that are equitable, responsive, and representative of students' lived experiences with schooling and their home realities. In this way, pre-service teachers can be taught critical literacy skills in the teacher preparation classroom using children's literature and then practice these skills in authentic classroom contexts.

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A similar pathway toward supporting pre-service teachers is through literacy artifacts (i.e., picture books, textbooks, articles, etc.) underlined by critical literacy approaches, such as examining classroom artifacts from multiple perspectives (Fisher & Ivey, 2006). Literacy artifacts include, for example, picture books, textbooks, articles, images, videos, and other resources that act as a catalyst for analyzing tropes, dominant discourses, and master narratives (Kim & Short, 2019). Dominant discourses refer to how language is codified to express ideology, sociopolitical beliefs, biases, and worldviews often of a given social group (such as those of teachers) (Gee, 1990). Master narratives are dominant texts that may perpetuate hegemonic and one-sided perspectives of social phenomena (Lewison et al., 2015). Hence, pre-service teachers may actively learn to counter master narratives by inviting other viewpoints to gain a robust and more egalitarian understanding of the curricula being taught at schools (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). For instance, in Rodríguez et al. (2021), the key component in using children's literature as a transformative tool in teacher preparation was to train pre-service teachers to read children's literature through a critical lens that will develop critically oriented perspectives. In this research, pre-service teachers took part in a course centering on bilingualism, bilingual education, and Latinx youth in a Midwestern teacher preparation program. In this course, pre-service teachers analyzed *Skippyjon Jones* through a critical lens and discerned the stereotypes that are harmful to Latinx children conveyed through linguistic and cultural caricaturing. Preparing pre-service teachers to be able to discern deficit framing and stereotyping in children's literature may predispose them to choose classroom resources more equitably and responsibly.

Additionally, scholars have found that children's literature is a powerful mode to engage pre-service teachers in difficult conversations (Ivey & Johnston, 2018). To support this, Crawley (2020) examined how exposing pre-service teachers ($n = 42$) to multicultural literature precipitated discussions about two focal topics concerning children's literature, "(1) emphasizing windows and mirrors and (2) considering stakeholder responses" (p.113). To discern specific attitudes pre-service teachers cultivated about children's literature, Crawley outlines two focal strategies, a book analysis of diverse representations in children's literature, including critical topics, such as those of chronic illness and sexual orientation, to convey how certain books can be mirrors for some, while windows for others. In addition to engaging pre-service teachers in discussions about books as windows and mirrors to diverse identities, the pre-service teachers also participated in role-play activities assuming the roles of stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and administrators by which they experienced greater connectedness with their craft, felt alleviated by practicing talking with "parents" about using diverse books, and explored possibilities for

incorporating critical literacy strategies in their future practice. Pre-service teachers recognized the need to include authentic narratives that engage students' cultural and social capital, experiences, and perspectives. Furthermore, Vaughn et al. (2015) found that pre-service teachers were able to negotiate critical topics during a semester-long critical literature unit. During the in-class space, teacher candidates "[listened] to the questions posed, they used each other's questions as a springboard to engage in a discussion exploring social class tensions, cultural ties, and constraints" (p. 29). Similarly, Hoppe (2022), found that pre-service teachers ($n = 6$) majoring in elementary education participated in read alouds featuring the following texts: *A Place Inside of Me: A Poem to Heal the Heart* (Elliott & Denmon, 2020), a picture book about the perceptions and emotions of a young Black man about the Black Lives Matter movement and *We Are Water Protectors*, a picture book inspired by Indigenous movements to protect the earth and its resources (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020). Hoppe (2022) used poetry to facilitate empathy in a teacher-led read aloud to prompt genuine student reactions by way of critically engaging with matters of identity, culture, and global issues and phenomena. Strong factors for reading interest were the acknowledgment of the multiple perspectives, the appeal of the narrative, and the ability to develop empathy and learn about the world through social justice texts, with each of these studies showing how teacher educators can support pre-service teachers' learning to teach from a critical perspective.

The changing global population, increased levels of migration, heightened human disparities in a postpandemic world, the devastating effects of human displacement, and scarcity of resources portray the need for the increase of diversity representation across the globe. Promoting a culture of tolerance, global awareness, and peace education is of great importance along with the necessity to foster a deep understanding of diverse human conditions and the state of the world. For this reason, the increased need for critical literacy for equitable and just practices within systems of education with clear curricular guidelines is necessary now more than ever (Luke, 2018).

Several studies have outlined the importance of critical literacy teaching in teacher preparation as embedded practice in the university curricula (Crawford-Garrett et al., 2020; Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2022). In DiGiacomo and Gutiérrez (2020), predominately White and middle-class pre-service teachers and elementary school students from nondominant communities took part in an afterschool university-school partnership titled, *El Pueblo Mágico* (the magical community) and engaged with the cultural and historical repertoires of students to enhance their learning of critical pedagogies. While in some instances pre-service teachers defaulted to using traditional didactical approaches

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(such as when organizing activities that followed traditional teacher-student power dynamics), in others, they engaged in authentic discourse and participated in dynamic and equitable learning structures. This study offers insights into how teacher education can be transformed to focus on teaching as learning of cultural funds, dynamic participation, and critical tools as artifacts for equitable and responsive practices. Similarly, Wessel-Powell and Bentley (2022) highlight how four teachers engaged in critical inquiry through children's literature. Two pre-service teachers specifically chose culturally responsive texts to use when tutoring students of Color, *Tar Beach* (Ringgold, 1991) and *The Bus Ride* (Miller, 1998). Consistent with previous studies on critical literacy in pre-service teacher education, these two pre-service teachers struggled with ways to engage with the layered meanings in the texts, especially in connecting past events with the students' present realities. For example, Nola (a pre-service teacher) had difficulty evoking Rosa Parks's experiences when she boarded a bus in the 1960s in fear that the students might assume that the same could happen to them. Drawing from the data in this study, the authors and teacher educators place focus on reflective practice and cultivating a critical lens in pre-service teachers as an underlying factor in teaching literacy. Moreover, structured critical literacy practices can guide pre-service teachers in their analysis of texts. For instance, Linder and Falk-Ross (2020) used a critical literacy graphic organizer, which prompted pre-service teachers to read children's literature through a critical lens. Pre-service teachers ($n = 97$) participated in a critical literacy methods course where they analyzed children's literature, modeled after an example in class using the text *The Rainbow Fish* (Phister, 1992) and answered questions focusing on interrogating injustices, the sociopolitical context, and messages conveyed in the text with teaching implications for classroom practice. The researchers conceive that pre-service teachers need further support to read beyond the surface of the text and illustrations in picture books. Inquiries about identifying perspectives that are omitted and also identifying the author's message were useful strategies to prompt pre-service teachers to think critically using children's literature and by applying the graphic organizer as a scaffolded guide to critical literacy.

Closely connected to critical literacy is reflective practice, which underscores the importance of self-analysis in teacher education of pre-service teachers' "visions and [...] personal ideologies and histories" (Vaughn & Kuby, 2019, p. 1). For this reason, pre-service teachers cannot learn about pedagogy without acknowledging how their prior experiences with schooling shape their ideas about teaching and also without understanding the population of students they will serve, which is why Briceño and Rodríguez-Mojica (2022) engaged pre-service teachers ($n = 77$) in an activity where they authored picture books

guided by critical literacy tenets. Pre-service teachers' writing process was guided by four critical literacy tenets focusing on students' cultural identities, sociopolitical contexts, messages, and text design (Vasquez et al., 2019). This activity was more conducive to facilitating reflective practice and self-analysis than traditional lessons as pre-service teachers created their own literacy artifacts and read them as a group, allowing them to explore different perspectives on critical issues. These studies underscore the necessity for explicit and scaffolded critical literacy practice in teacher education and support how "Critical literacy as a way of being and doing in the world contributes to creating spaces to take on these sorts of issues, engaging learners in powerful and pleasurable ways and creating spaces to achieve a better life for all" (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 308).

As in these studies and in our work with pre-service teachers, we found that reading critical texts from a critical perspective can challenge master narratives and authoritative sources of knowledge in beginning teachers. Engaging pre-service teachers in critical conversations through literature can help to facilitate multiple perspectives. For example, one illustrative example we found across our research can be seen in the following reflection of a White, European American teacher candidate, Lauren (pseudonym), who was prompted to think deeply about her educational ideology after reading *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Takaki, 1993). Lauren explained how reading this text drew her attention to "the classic White male perspective on history" (Sotirovska & Vaughn, 2022a, p. 14) and helped her realize that she took this perspective as commonplace and never questioned it or looked at history through other lenses. Lauren gained a new understanding of historical events and phenomena, which triggered "an overwhelming aha moment . . . [which she described as] a moment of clarity but also a moment of confusion" (Sotirovska & Vaughn, 2022a, p. 14). As this example suggests, the teacher candidate learned that there are multiple perspectives in what she perceived to be definite, authoritative, and factual knowledge and exemplifies how applying a critical lens changes one's understanding of dominant narratives. Additionally, across our research, we can see that Ana (pseudonym) experienced points of tension, where the literacy artifacts acted as a catalyst to critical literacy learning for this pre-service teacher. In her literacy methods course, Ana was introduced to multiple perspectives of looking at historical events and "realized that growing up, the lessons [she] was taught weren't as well researched as they should have been," and instead, they were often taught from a single perspective and "from one source" (Sotirovska & Vaughn, 2022a, p. 15), and it took additional research in her teacher preparation classes to uncover different perspectives