In the past 10 years, the expectations for P–12 educators have emphasized 21st century skills in such areas as technology, literacy, assessment, and global education. The increased focus in these areas—which were prompted by national standards; global, economic, and technological demands; and growing diversity in schools—require that individuals discuss, solve problems, and take action to apply a new approach to learning. These expectations have significant implications for teaching and learning in our current market-driven information-rich context. For educators, 21st century issues and trends raise a range of questions, which are addressed in this edited volume. The book aims to highlight the tensions, perspectives, and practices that define critical practice today by examining how critical pedagogy and critical literacy practices are enacted in today’s classrooms and whether students are being prepared to be global citizens with 21st century skills. The volume addresses such questions as:

- How are schools bridging gaps and crossing boundaries by bringing diverse perspectives into the learning environment, and how are schools expanding teaching and learning beyond the classroom walls?
- What are schools doing to increase parental involvement and community outreach while meeting the needs of students and parents?
- In what ways are schools fostering “global” citizens?
- What strategies, technologies, and digital tools are educators using to support student learning, literacy development, and problem solving and collaboration among students?
- What assessments can educators use to effectively measure performance of 21st century skills?
- What are the most effective techniques for incorporating literacy as the foundation for learning across the curriculum? What factors impact integration?
- What evaluation methods can be used to assess programs and initiatives?
- What are effective methods for engaging all learners in today’s classrooms?

Another goal of the book is to help us better understand what we should teach, how we should teach it, and what kinds of experiences teachers can provide to better support students to meet expectations and to foster their development as critically engaged citizens. The following chapters present work conducted with participants in different contexts, namely in school, outside of school, and in online-learning environments. All of the chapters provide insights and examples on transforming teaching and learning in relation to 21st century skills such as technology, literacy, collaborative learning, and community and civic engagement. Although the authors use a wide range of theoretical frameworks to explore teaching and learning, each author uses the common themes of critical pedagogy and critical literacy to explore these 21st century expectations via curriculum, instructional methods, and learning contexts and experiences.
Critical pedagogy and critical literacy were selected to structure the discussion in this book because these perspectives provide frameworks for effective practices that will foster the expectations noted above for 21st century citizens. We know that in contexts where educators use critical pedagogical methods to engage in critical reflection and critique of social inequalities, the practices highlighted by Freire (2000) challenge traditional norms and lead to more collaboration between the teacher, students, and the wider community. In these instances, both teacher and students negotiate and co-construct learning, classroom artifacts, and assessments. Furthermore, critical pedagogy seeks to build on what students know by providing opportunities for them to demonstrate their understanding of the real world. McLaren (2003) suggests that critical pedagogy is an analysis of the relationship between culture, knowledge, and power. He claimed that there is a “hidden curriculum” in schools that aims to perpetuate inequalities within the larger society by favoring “certain forms of knowledge over others and [affirming] the dreams, desires, and values of select groups of students over other groups, often discriminatorily on the basis of race, class, and gender” (p. 86). Freire (2000) also noted that classroom practices can mirror the oppressive elements found in society.

To foster critical pedagogy and critical literacy practices, Christensen (1999) believes that the role of the teacher is to draw on students’ prior knowledge about the world and purposefully draw students into discussions about the world. Similarly, Forget, Lyle, and Reinhart-Clark (2004) claim that instructional frameworks that promote critical literacy position students as active participants in their own learning. For example, Callahan (2001) indicated that students’ interaction with text in school supports critical literacy development when they closely examine text and critique social issues covertly found in the larger society. Although research does not explicitly posit that literacy moves from a focus on skills acquisition to what has been deemed “critical literacy” (McDaniel, 2004), researchers do support the need for learners to navigate information, utilize a variety of perspectives in order to make judgments, or use their literacy skills for pragmatic purposes within the larger society, which are elements of critical literacy theory. Critical literacy theory provides a cogent framework that will support development of 21st century skills; it provides a lens through which students “question the basic assumptions of our society” (Christensen, 1999, p. 212), and it supports the exploration of social structures in society while accounting for a historical framework by moving “beyond a description of society and on to an interrogation of it” (Christensen, 1999, p. 212). Critical literacy supports students’ interaction with texts so they “integrate knowledge from multiple sources, including music, video, online databases, and other media. They . . . think critically about these sources of information that can be found nearly instantaneously throughout the world” (Bruce, 2002, p. 17). This pedagogical framework serves different educational purposes. First, it allows educators to “see the school not simply as an arena of indoctrination or socialization or a site of instruction but also as a cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment and self-transformation” (McLaren, 2003, p. 70). Second, it presents ideas that explain the relationships inherent in the teaching and learning process and can be used to support inquiries on instructional approaches that foster P–12 students’ literacy development in a postmodern context. Third, it can also help explain the forces that influence pedagogy, policy, and curriculum in our global context. Finally, it provides support for instruction that reinforces notions of culture and social interaction but expands these ideas to a critical evaluation and critique of social issues prevalent in the larger society.

I argue that these perspectives reveal two aspects of critical literacy that benefit the discussion presented in the collection of chapters in this book. First, Koh (2002) asserts that critical thinking requires specific skills that are developed in a supporting culture. Second, critical literacy encourages students to challenge taken-for-granted meanings and “truth” about a way of thinking, reading, and writing the
world. It works against the notion that meaning is transparent, neutral, and unproblematic. Critical literacy also questions the neutrality of power relations within discourses. In pedagogic terms, students should be encouraged to develop inquiring minds that question the cultural and ideological assumptions underwriting any text. (p. 259)

Christensen (1999) claims, “critical literacy . . . equips students to ‘read’ power relationships at the same time that it imparts academic skills” (p. 210). It focuses on students actively making connections between their lives and the larger social context by moving beyond the surface structure (Kucer, 2001) or meaning of various texts to increase their understanding of content area subjects and issues embedded in society. Students begin to examine how power and inequity are rooted in different aspects of our lives by exploring language, popular culture, his/her personal views of the world, and personal relationships (Christensen, 1999, p. 213).

There are three main reasons why this volume will resonate with a wide audience, namely P–12 educators, preservice and in-service teachers, school and district leaders (administrators), teacher educators, and researchers across social science disciplines that have an interest in education research. First, the chapters I have assembled in this collection allow readers to consider the juxtaposition of teaching, learning, and curriculum, and how critical pedagogy and critical literacy are enacted in today’s context to foster 21st century skills and citizenship. I wanted to frame a discussion about contemporary practice by exploring how we can position critical pedagogy and critical literacy in today’s educational contexts in light of the global influences (e.g., technology, economy, and policy) impacting traditional and nontraditional teaching and learning settings. Second, the researchers and educators contributing to this volume present important work that helps to conceptualize “critical” practice by (a) identifying methods that foster diversity and engage diverse learners across contexts (beyond traditional classroom walls), (b) drawing conclusions from critical literacy and critical pedagogy research on practice to make recommendations for teacher preparation and development, and (c) exploring techniques that foster global education and meet 21st century needs. The contributing authors considered such issues as social justice, traditional versus nontraditional learning spaces, gender, sexuality, diversity, engagement and motivation, teacher education, 21st century literacy skills, and technology. Third, this discussion is warranted because macro level changes have redefined literacy, the learning process, what it means to “know,” and how knowledge is acquired. Learning now encapsulates vehicles for knowledge acquisition that include learning through communication and technologies (Bruce, 2002) and learning through literacy practices that connect out-of-school experiences within the larger community (Bruce, 2002; Moje, 2000). Consequently, the role of the teacher has changed, and classroom activities now place students as increasingly more active participants in acquiring knowledge. Freire (1998, 2000) and Giroux (1988) posited that when learners actively participate in education they can construct meaning in social contexts. They also learn through critical reflection about social issues (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 1988), social interaction among peers, and between teacher and student (Bandura, 1973; Bruner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978), and experiences (Rogers, 1989) that connect to “real life.”

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In Section 1, “Context of 21st Century Teaching and Learning,” 4 introductory chapters begin the discussion of how the demands for 21st century skills have impacted educational contexts. The synthesis of recent research presented by Howard Menand in chapter 1 explores the impact of globalization on
classroom practice. Menand uses critical theory to examine curriculum and teaching to determine the impact of globalization on student achievement and students’ development as active citizens. In chapter 2, Salika A. Lawrence explores how teachers and students are using technology to support students’ literacy development and to prepare students better with 21st century skills. The chapter presents definitions of 21st century skills along with examples from real classrooms of how teachers and students demonstrate them. In chapter 3, Elena Railean also examines the implications of globalization. However, Railean’s discussion focuses on how new technologies have impacted teaching and learning. The chapter highlights the increasing importance of flexibility and self-regulated learning and the significance of their influence on student engagement. Section 1 concludes with a co-authored chapter that chronicles the limitations of algebra policy and its implications for mathematics education today. In chapter 4, Rahila Simzar and Thurston Domina consider the issues of diversity and equity and how the achievement gap is perpetuated in mathematical learning. Simzar and Domina contend that student motivation can be used to accommodate classroom diversity and support student progress in mathematics.

Although there is some overlap between and among the chapters in the collection, Section 2, “Crossing Boundaries and Redefining Learning Spaces,” seeks to focus the discussion on specific teachers and students and how teaching and learning are shaped by contextual factors. Chapter 5 and chapter 6 report on practices within school contexts, while chapter 7 and chapter 8 discuss teaching and learning outside of school. In chapter 5, Stacia Stribling and Elizabeth DeMulder share examples of how diversity impacted literacy instruction in 2 early childhood classrooms. The authors use critical literacy to reframe what it means to be literate and argue that students bring valuable knowledge to classrooms, which may not be reflected in the curriculum but can transform the context and empower students as members of the classroom community. Additionally, Stribling and DeMulder contend that culturally relevant pedagogy requires that teachers move beyond the traditional curriculum to support students’ literacy development by building upon what students bring to the classroom. In chapter 6, Kimberly Hartnett-Edwards and Eron Reed examine how a school’s decision to implement an instructional model called platooning led to educational inequities for students based on their ability levels. Hartnett-Edwards and Reed report that as a result of the unanticipated social justice issues that emerged from implementing the model, teachers became empowered to circumvent school mandates and change practice to better support the needs of students.

Chapter 7 and chapter 8 report on work done outside of school and examine its impact in relation to in-school expectations and practices. In chapter 7, Heidi Hallman looks at the perspectives of future teachers concerning in-school and outside-of-school literacy to determine how they viewed students’ outside-of-school literacy practices in relation to in-school expectations. In chapter 8, Taichi Akutsu, Richard Gordon, and Keiko Noguchi use a tool called an Instructional Organizer (IO) to closely examine a teacher’s practice in 2 contexts: in-school and in an after-school program. The authors found that the teacher’s and students’ practices in each context were different, with evidence of more flexibility and “flow” observed during violin lessons in the afterschool program compared to in-school experiences. The IO tool described in this chapter presents future researchers with a framework for conducting research that may lead to generalizations about how teachers can reframe practice to enhance in-school learning experiences for students.

Section 3, “Reconceptualizing the Curriculum,” begins with a report by the research team of Mary Jane Harkins, Catherine Baillie Abidi, Taunya Pynn Crowe, and Renata Verri, who explored how the Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL) curriculum promotes global citizenship. In chapter 9, the authors used Freire’s reflective inquiry to determine that the EHL curriculum promotes student engagement and
global citizenship, fosters teamwork among educators, and provides teachers with instructional tools to further enhance students’ critical thinking. Similarly, in chapter 10 Aubry Threlkeld examines children’s literature on same-sex parenting to evaluate the extent to which the texts can be used to foster critical literacy in elementary classrooms. Section 3 concludes with a unique look at Shakespeare and how he can be used outside of school to influence familial relationships. In chapter 11, Mary Rice highlights tensions between traditional classroom instruction and students’ interactions with Shakespeare as compared to their out-of-school experiences with Shakespeare’s work.

Salika A. Lawrence
William Paterson University, USA

REFERENCES


