Chapter 5

“Dear Sophia, I’m Going to Another World”: Transforming Literacy Practices in Early Childhood

Stacia M. Stribling
George Mason University, USA

Elizabeth K. DeMulder
George Mason University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter shares anecdotes from two early childhood classrooms where issues of diversity helped shape and drive literacy instruction. The stories of change and challenge in these two classroom settings highlight the potential for literacy learning when it is grounded in critical, culturally relevant pedagogy, and when it takes seriously the knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom community. The chapter has four main purposes: (a) to emphasize the need to reframe/redefine what it means to be literate, (b) to explore the ways that innovative critical literacy practices can be used in early childhood settings as effective methods for engaging young children and supporting their literacy development, (c) to share some of the tensions that emerge when incorporating critical literacy practices in diverse early childhood settings, and (d) to propose ways to better prepare and support teachers to do this work.

INTRODUCTION

Diversity is a fact of life in the United States. While this diversity is evident in all aspects of our daily lives, school systems and educators must address what diversity means for the future by examining how we educate students from various racial, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic communities. By the year 2020, the student population in the U.S. is expected to consist of 46% students of color (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989). In addition, there are currently about 14 million students in the U.S. who come from homes where English is not the primary language (August & Shanahan, 2006). The challenge for educators is to not only find ways to best teach students with such diverse experiences and needs, but to explore how those diverse experiences can enhance the learning of all students.

This chapter shares anecdotes from two early childhood classrooms where issues of diversity
helped shape and drive literacy instruction. The stories of change and challenge in these two classroom settings highlight the potential for literacy learning when it is grounded in critical, culturally relevant pedagogy and when it takes seriously the knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom community. Research studies have demonstrated that young children are capable of critically examining issues of social justice (e.g., Cowhey, 2006; Vasquez, 2004). The work conducted in this area is replete with engaging stories from classrooms about the ways in which critical literacy (i.e., using reading and writing activities to explore social justice and equity issues) supports the natural curiosity and sense of fairness inherent in young minds and the capacity young children have for engaging in social action. There is so much more to learn, however, that will help us understand the impact of this process on student learning and the ways in which teachers can envision and enact this approach in their own classroom settings. Thus this chapter has four main purposes: (a) to emphasize the need to reframe/redefine what it means to be literate; (b) to explore the ways that innovative critical literacy practices can be used in early childhood settings as effective methods for engaging young children and supporting their literacy development; (c) to share some of the tensions that emerge when incorporating critical literacy practices in diverse early childhood settings; and (d) to propose ways to better prepare and support teachers to do this work.

BACKGROUND

Diversity has become a focus of educational conversations, particularly when educational researchers consider the documented achievement gap in U.S. schools; white middle-class students continually outperform students of color and those from lower socio-economic levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). In an effort to close this gap, the U.S. Department of Education instituted the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Unfortunately, the current legislation actually “exacerbate[s] the existing achievement gap between black and Latino students and their white counterparts” (Paul, 2004, p. 648). For example, students from low-income families and students of color are increasingly more likely to attend schools with large class sizes, less experienced teachers, less money spent per pupil, and curricula developed around discrete knowledge bits rather than integrated critical-thinking activities (Kozol, 2005; Neuman, 2006; Paul, 2004).

In response to this problem, and drawing on the extant research, educational researchers are calling for classroom teachers to address the needs of the diverse student population with challenging, engaging, culturally responsive curricula that encourage students to be critical consumers of knowledge and active participants in the democratic process (Neuman, 2006; Nieto, 1999; Shannon, 2007; Siu-Runyan, 2007; Sweeney, 1997). Nowhere has this call been heard more loudly than in the field of literacy development. Reading is an area targeted by NCLB as evidenced by the numerous initiatives developed to get all students reading by third grade (i.e., Good Start, Grow Smart, n.d.; Reading First, n.d.). But as Neuman (2006) highlights, these programs are often based on a limited view of literacy that emphasizes the memorization of discrete sounds and symbols, making reading merely a code to be cracked and not an activity that carries meaning and power for understanding and manipulating one’s world. She contends that:

Learning experiences that help low-income children become skillful at knowing many things—encouraging them to express their ideas through language and enabling them to raise questions that develop more complex understandings and concepts—are the key to closing the achievement gap (Neuman, 2006, p. 31).
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