

# Book Reviews

*Moving Critical Literacies Forward: A New Look at Praxis across Contexts*. Edited by Jessica Zacher Pandya and JuliAnna Ávila. New York: Routledge, 2014. 206 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-81814-8. (Reviewed by Jennifer K. Shah).

## Introduction and Purpose

The word *critical* stems from the Greek word meaning “to argue or judge” (Luke, 2014, p. 22). Approaching any text critically is key lest the reader be easily duped or manipulated. According to McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004), critical literacy “views readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text’s message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between reader and authors” (p. 14). Four common dimensions of critical literacy are (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple perspectives, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 382). I will utilize these dimensions as a lens to critically review the book *Moving Critical Literacies Forward: A New Look at Praxis across Contexts* (2014), edited by Jessica Zacher Pandya and JuliAnna Ávila. What follows is a summary of content interwoven with the text’s strengths and limitations.

At first glance the text seems innovative. The title and images imply that new themes, theories, and ideas around the topic of critical literacy, including an interactive Web 2.0, will be discussed. The cover image (Figure 1) features two females engaged in dialogue: one holds a book while her peer holds a hand-held device resembling a smartphone. Surprisingly, the editors make no reference to the cover or explain the use of images that set the tone for their book, so it is up to the reader to decide whether new literacies are truly addressed.



Figure 1. Book

The first chapter gives the reader good insight into the purpose and intent of the work. Teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers who want to pursue critical literacy instruction are identified as the intended audience. The editors discuss their aims, literacy identities, issues they struggle with as teacher educators, and examples of their current scholarship around critical literacy, giving the reader a good idea of each editor’s background and stance before moving on to the rest of the work. The main message to readers is that “critical literacy is alive, well, and needed, at all age levels, and in all (educational) contexts” (p. 11), which has been proven repeatedly in the last ten years (e.g., McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Morrell, 2008; Stevens & Bean, 2007; Vasquez, 2004). Perhaps in lieu of the current implementation of Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) the editors

believed a new text on critical literacy was timely and chose to expand on original work previously published in journals and books. Readers should note that seven of the fourteen chapters are expanded versions of articles originally found in the journal *Theory into Practice* (2012) 5(11). Other chapters, such as the ones written by Janks (Chapter 3) and Vasquez (Chapter 13), regurgitate information found in previously published books (Janks, 2014; Vasquez, 2004). The biggest strength of the compilation of these works is that each individual chapter falls into one or more dimensions of critical literacy as defined by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002).

### **Disrupting the Commonplace**

Disrupting the commonplace requires critically literate readers to “see their ‘everyday’ through new lenses” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002, p. 383) which is well addressed by a variety of authors in *Moving Critical Literacies Forward*. Luke (Chapter 2) sets the political tone of this work by describing critical literacy as “the use of technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of institutions and everyday life” (p. 21). Luke’s definition disrupted the commonplace by deviating from the traditional view of education, which perpetuates current societal structures. Finn (Chapter 4) disrupted the commonplace by critiquing meritocracy and identifying it as the culprit for educational opportunity gaps. Instead of moving working class students up to the middle class individually, he argued for a more collective approach through education for empowerment. Moore, Zancanella, and Ávila (Chapter 10) deconstructed policy reform in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by taking a closer political look at Common Core State Standards.

By interrogating who was involved and who benefits from these new standards, the authors problematize federal standardization, which is often not done with teachers and teacher candidates (Picower, 2013). Teacher educators must help teacher candidates learn not only how to critique the status quo but also how to achieve their goals, including those related to embedding critical literacy within the current educational context. Previously published work elaborates on how critical literacy—including digital literacy and Common Core State Standards—can work together, which offers teachers some hope instead of simply eliciting anger and frustration with the current climate (Ávila & Moore, 2012).

### **Interrogating Multiple Perspectives**

Several of the chapters in *Moving Critical Literacies Forward* interrogate multiple perspectives, which require teachers to evaluate several points of view (Lewison, Leland, Harste, & Christensen, 2008). Exley, Woods, and Dooley (Chapter 5) discussed the use of fairy tales in an Australian school with a newly implemented curricular framework. Researchers and the teacher each took turns at implementing critical literacy units and demonstrated various approaches to critical literacy instruction with the same class. Unfortunately, only printed texts were included in this research, leaving a very narrow picture of what can be done with the genre of fairy tales, especially using multimedia. Comber and Nixon (Chapter 7) asked the reader to view their environment with a critical lens, and introduced a new aspect of

critical literacy called *place-based pedagogy*, which sees context as something to be analyzed. Through the use of film creation, students and teachers were able to view their school, neighborhood, and community as non-neutral entities. Finally, Takekawa (Chapter 11) described the Japanese context in a neoliberal sense, which paralleled policy reform faced by teachers in the United States. This chapter demonstrated that educators across the world face similar issues in regard to critical literacy implementation in an era of accountability and standardization.

Questioning multiple perspectives also requires asking about whose voices are missing from the dialogue (Luke & Freebody, 1997). In most chapters, teachers' experiences are shared by researchers, rather than by the teachers themselves. Although the featured authors do much to bring light to various perspectives, the absence of teachers' voices in the discussion to move critical literacy forward is disheartening.

### **Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues**

Focusing on sociopolitical issues requires examining daily politics that affect our lives (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Flint and Laman (Chapter 6) used the Writer's Workshop approach with elementary school teachers to implement a critical literacy unit on students' lived experiences with social justice through poetry. Students viewed this experience as transformative, and shared their narratives with the community. Johnson and Vasudevan (Chapter 8) also focused on "critical literacy performances" (p. 99), but focused on those that are unrehearsed and related to everyday texts valued by high school students, including clothing and accessories. Through three student vignettes, authors told teachers to put on a critical lens when evaluating certain behaviors normally considered taboo in classrooms. Although the theme of consumerism emerges in this chapter, no reference to what Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) call *kinderculture* or the corporatization of schools is discussed. Another example of the sociopolitical dimension is described by Pandya (Chapter 12) as an unsuccessful attempt in the US to standardize critical literacy instruction. Pandya described the pitfalls of a standardized design and warned against using such measures for critical literacy implementation in schools. Of the four dimensions, focusing on sociopolitical issues is the best addressed in *Moving Critical Literacies Forward*.

### **Taking a Stand and Promoting Social Justice**

Taking a stand and promoting social justice requires teachers and students to take action, and sets critical literacy apart from critical thinking (Mulcahy, 2011). Comber and Simpson (2001) defined this aspect as using what we know, including our use of language and power, to question the status quo, especially in circumstances related to injustice. It comes as no surprise that examples of taking social action are found in Comber's contribution with Helen Nixon (Chapter 7), which describes how students were able to play a role in taking social action regarding the architecture of their new school. Rosario-Ramos and Johnson (Chapter 9) elaborated on the importance of community-based organizations as institutions where students gain access to critical discourses. By studying a cultural center located in a low-income

Puerto Rican neighborhood, the authors learned about resilience, textual resources outside of schools, and the potential to working with such organizations. Tips for teachers on how to go about integrating community-based organizations are included here. The authors could have gone further to discuss how these examples demonstrate critical service-learning, which includes issues of inequity, power, and language and weaves “awareness with action” (Hart, 2006, p. 28).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Critically analyzing a text requires the reader to appreciate as well as critique. Strengths of this work include establishing a balance of theory and practice by providing enough conceptual and empirical argument and evidence. By formatting the information in a story-like fashion, the editors have also made the content easily accessible for stakeholders who are more concerned with what happened rather than details of the research design. Evaluating *Moving Critical Literacies Forward* through the four dimensions of critical literacy demonstrates that the text does meet the criteria of critical literacy instruction, but the envelope could be pushed further. The editors were successful in their aims of bringing critical literacy to light and proving that critical literacy instruction is important, possible, and happening at various levels in education in various ways in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Certain chapters expanded on what critical literacy could include, including place and space, but new literacies were not appropriately addressed. The biggest contention with this text is the promise made with the title. Truly moving critical literacy forward today includes focusing on media literacy, including social media (Lankshear & Knoble, 2011), participatory action research with teachers who implement critical literacy in their classrooms, and expanding on the barriers to critical literacy instruction as implementation of Common Core State Standards continues.

Overall, *Moving Critical Literacies Forward* is a good introduction for those just discovering critical literacy, but most of the information found in this text is just as easily located in previously published journal articles and books. Teachers, teacher educators, and researchers well read on the topic of critical literacy will not find much new information here and should keep moving forward.

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