DELVING INTO CRITICAL LITERACY IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM\(^1\)

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There is power in the written word. However, the power behind any idea requires the reader to be judicious in its meaning. When we read any literature—a poster, billboard advertisement, newspaper article, artwork, book or play—are we being unwittingly coerced by the author’s message? In fact, we may simply be absorbing someone else’s point of view with little insight on our part. Developing critical literacy skills in students from an early age is vital and should be every teacher’s goal. When students are taught how to evaluate a text in critical terms, they are empowered to consider and analyze the influences that are shaping their thoughts and ideas. Strong critical thinking skills enable students to question and challenge attitudes, values, and beliefs that are hidden below the surface as they read or listen to an author’s message. The challenge for teachers is to help students unlock its mystery, to understand the basic intent of an author’s message. As teachers, how do we provide students with the critical literacy skills to comprehend? Critical Literacy holds the key for teachers today, the means by which we introduce students to a type of media and have them critique it for its genuine meaning. The benefit of critical literacy is to get students to think about media around them, assessing the statement behind its message as one that may be just or unjust to citizens in our society, fair or unfair to individuals who make up the diversity of our community. In effect, we are teaching students a process of interpretation by which they question everything ranging from the author’s purpose to possible word choice laden with bias, or omission of facts that undermine other points of view. It offers learners the reflective tools to appraise communication itself flooding their minds each and every day of their young lives.

To put the theory of critical literacy into practice, I began an action research project over several weeks in a grade three classroom to stimulate the cognitive skills of young learners in their development of comprehension. I decided to use a story I had written entitled ‘Liam and Ezzie,’ a narrative that deals with a skin disease known as eczema. Eczema inflames the surface of the skin with a rash, giving rise to symptoms that range from itching, flaking of

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the skin, to bleeding; its outbreak may attack any part of the body. What message would the students take from my story? Would it cause them to gain interest and analyze any implication of inequality extending beyond the disease known as eczema, itself? Both the students and I would spend the following weeks on a journey to deconstruct the theme of my story, unraveling the strands of narrative to capture meanings beneath its surface. Together, we would reflect and bring understanding to eczema as well as the ramifications of abuse behind such an image-conscious disease—our mind’s eye honing our critical skills toward wisdom through the time we spent together.

I engaged the students with a read aloud of my story ‘Liam and Ezzie’. Two students were called out to the hallway where they agreed to wear bandages on their faces as a prompt to simulate the disease. Upon re-entering the classroom, these students experienced giggles and askew stares from the rest of the students; the result was our volunteer students experienced apprehension from their peers in the classroom, choosing to avoid eye contact for the entire read-aloud. Critical Literacy relies on prior knowledge for comprehension, our ability to infer unjust treatment from our own personal experiences. All of us have encountered the hurt from the stings of teasing and taunts in our past; as educators, our responsibility as educators is to intervene on these examples of discrimination and empower students to contend with such inequities, enabling them to use their critical thinking skills to connect with the values we share as a community. Critical Literacy provides students with a two-way street: to improve their comprehension skills in literature and empathize with the individual who bears all the implications behind a visual disease such as eczema.

As our unit on Critical Literacy progressed, we used dramatizations to deconstruct the theme of my story through a different medium. Students learned to analyze aspects of the narrative when they were actively engaged in role play. Opportunities to delve into a character’s thoughts and feelings provide students explorations into perspectives that relate to their prior knowledge. In groups, students were instructed to give a presentation, based on the chronology of the narrative from my story. This part of our unit proved to be a revelation. Not only did the students deepen their understanding of the story, but they were able to perceive a key element that separates the oppressor from the oppressed: the visual sign from the condition of the disease itself— in this case, eczema. Students in their groups divided themselves up into two categories; one part would recount the story as narrators while their other partners would depict an image of eczema, scratching parts of their skin, attempting to cover up a part of their face that represented a stigma to them. One student decided to use temporary scrapes on his face as a symbol for eczema. Although he was a willing volunteer during this dramatization, he later admitted that he was grateful his injuries would heal and disappear over time. Here lies an ominous fact that discrimination extends beyond eczema, into the colours of race, gender, and religion.

Questioning is vital component of critical literacy. When students are taught to question the text, to consider the author’s intent, to think about whose voice is evident or whose voice is missing, they delve deeply into analyzing and understanding the text. In our case, the grade three students were able to recognize an element that was not directly mentioned
throughout the narrative. It was the theme of bullying. Liam, the main character in the story, is a target of bullying because his eczema happens to be a visual disease, a circumstance which tormenters use as leverage to seize power over a victim. This grade three classroom embraces the 'Tribes Learning Community', a theory from which all participants must be interveners, no longer bystanders who disregard unjust actions that demean others in their community. The fact that eczema provides us with a bullying incident helped students to identify such violence and underscore our knowledge to remedy its scourge before one of us became a victim. One student memorized a significant part of the story for her presentation. When I asked her why she took the time to commit so many words to memory, her response was: 'Well, I knew if I was going to mess up it was OK because I didn’t think anyone was going to laugh at me.’ A prerequisite to knowledge involves trust, the feeling where all ideas and opinions share the ethos of respect among an attentive audience. Without character values established within any classroom, critical literacy could not withstand the diverse opinions shared among the students with each other for fear of ridicule.

When students participate in Literature Circles, they are given the opportunity to consolidate and extend their critical literacy skills. In this format, students gather in groups to discuss questions involving themes from a text. To create an atmosphere in which students may partake in a thoughtful discussion, the grade three children were given questions that asked them to draw inferences from my story, ‘Liam and Ezzie.’ We reviewed what it takes to be a contemplative and respectful listener: among the key components, the focus was the ability to look at a speaker and use a polite tone of voice as a means to quiz their peers for a response where disagreement might take place. To help listening skills, I used what I call a ‘Literature Circle’ card that the speaker must be touching in order to be the orator in the group while everyone else pays attention. Critical thinking involves the ability of students to listen and undergo a process of contemplation where they begin to appreciate the steps involved in a thoughtful response. What were they able to surmise? Students were able to identify the playground as a forum for bullying, the place where abuse may take place far enough away from a teacher on duty. Furthermore, many learners experienced a kind of epiphany: the true power for a safe community belongs to them, the students; it is their ability to stand up for the rights of every individual so that no one uses bullying as a means to undermine anyone’s self-esteem. Literature Circles provided much of the impetus for critical thinking in our unit of study, helping students gain insights into character and actions in a story, making them aware of injustices, and ultimately teaching them the value of bringing harmony to our schools.

When teachers conference with students, the purpose is to guide instruction, a process by which we help scaffold a learner’s critical thinking to reach insight in their capacity for new understanding. Our specific objective was to help expand their comprehension skills, having each student create their own illustration from a part of the story. For this activity to be successful, each student needed to perceive an image in their head, using a specific scene from the narrative in the story. We isolated parts of the story text into four possible illustrations for students. Each part of these incidents in the story bore descriptive language and action verbs to initiate mental images in students from their prior knowledge.
Essential in this stage of our unit was conferencing—taking the time with each group to ensure they saw actions in the verbs and visual details from the adjectives. To make images possible for young readers, they need to infer a correlation between the events in the story and personal experiences analogous to the meaning within the story. In effect, student cognition is the projector that propels images within the workings of their imagination. There is a light at times that suddenly turns on and shines in a student during such a conference—the lights I saw flashing in their eyes were visual images, another reading strategy to strengthen comprehension.

What did we see in the grade three illustrations? There was the thrust of colours telling the story of a boy with eczema. On clothing was the colour of red, a sign of blood—the very colour of Liam’s disease—indicating a psychological loss that Liam felt from his tormentors. All the power one could muster from an orange, black, or purple clothed the characters who used their position of strength to terrorize Liam. An important connection was present for the grade three students, the moment at which the story helps them draw conclusions about our own actions in the world outside the text. Their own visual imagery paused to reflect on the consequences of eczema for a young boy and the pictures became stuck in their young minds, encouraging them to rouse for the cause of equality.

Justice is not a concept that comes easily to students. Its initial appearance is an abstraction, something that only begins to take shape within us as we undergo a process to develop our humanity. Through empathy, students begin to identify with the emotions of their peers, the feelings of hurt and anguish from their ongoing lives attending school. However, justice is not understood through feelings alone. Essential is the process in which critical literacy helps students recognize incidents of injustice, deconstructing the significance of equity for all individuals in a community. Critical literacy even lets students see the other side of the prism: the possibility of a solution through a reflective process where minds take the time to understand a means to peace through the gift of cognition. The benefactor of such a gift is critical literacy, an essential thinking practice which empowers students to probe deeply, look beyond the literal meaning of text and consider multiple perspectives. Literature holds influence over readers. When we take the time to develop critical thinking skills with our students, we equip them with tools they need to be reflective, responsible and empathetic members of our society now and well into the future.

**Biographical note:**

Mark Bennett has taught both in Canada and at international schools, including Saudi Arabia, Mexico and Colombia. He is currently a teacher with York Catholic District School Board. Mr. Bennett has published other professional articles over the past years on topics ranging from Dyslexia to Metacognition.