

Exploring the American Revolution from Multiple Perspectives through Critical Literacy Discussions in a Fifth-Grade Classroom

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Abstract

The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks require that the American Revolution be taught in fifth-grade classrooms. Unfortunately, many teachers must resort to utilizing textbooks that are unappealing to students and that share history from just one point of view. Incorporating quality children's literature into the social studies curriculum can provide a more well-rounded view of historical events. Furthermore, critical literacy discussions encourage children to question what might be missing from the text, and understand content from multiple perspectives. This naturalistic, descriptive study conducted in a fifth-grade classroom in a multicultural, suburban school in southeastern Massachusetts, examined how reading children's literature about the American Revolution influenced students' understanding of historical events. Students were guided by their teacher to read their textbook critically, explore the educational website *BrainPOP*, and read quality children's literature about various groups that participated in the Revolutionary War. Findings suggest that reading and reviewing various sources versus a single history textbook led students to develop a better understanding of the American Revolution. Students' initial beliefs that only white males were involved in the Revolution gave way to new understanding of the important roles of white women, male and female African slaves, Native Americans, and children. This study shows positive outcomes of integrating critical literacy in social studies instruction, helping students develop a more comprehensive understanding of historical events.

Keywords: Critical Literacy, American Revolution, Children's Literature

1. Introduction: What Is Critical Literacy?:

Critical literacy is an instructional approach that helps students to become active readers. Critical literacy is particularly beneficial when reading content area texts. Many students in schools today tend to take what they read at face value. They don't ask questions and simply assume what they have read presents all of the facts they need to know¹. Since reading and writing are being implemented across curricula, students should be knowledgeable on how to question and evaluate texts rather than taking the material at face value. It is important for students to trust what they have read, however, they need to know that questioning the text is not bad; rather it is what critical readers do.

Critical literacy is a form of active reading. Critical literacy helps students to not just passively read and accept what the author has written but to instead question, examine, and dispute the text². Critical literacy can be done individually or as a class. There is a powerful relationship between the reader and the author of a text. The relationship should be questioned by readers to encourage reflection, transformation, and action³. When students read the title of a text, they trust the author to provide them with the information that is implied by the title. After reading a text, students can ask themselves who wrote the text, whose voice may be missing, or what perspectives may have been lost. This is the reflection process. Transformation occurs when readers take what they already know

along with what is in the text and take action upon it. They may agree or disagree and present what they see is missing or what may need to be added to help elaborate on a specific detail⁴. Students can practice critical reading by discussing texts that they have read with their peers or a guardian at home. McLaughlin & DeVoogd (2004) explain Friere's (1970) belief that "social constructivists believe that learners make sense of their world by connecting their prior knowledge with that they are learning"⁵. When students connect their prior knowledge to the text at hand, it becomes more memorable and relatable. Students can exercise critical thinking not only when reading texts but also when viewing media, social media, magazines and newspapers. By engaging in critical reading of a variety of texts, students develop as critical thinkers⁶.

1.1 Theorists And Researchers Within Critical Literacy Practices:

The powerful relationship between a reader and the text is always changing. Paulo Freire sees that the relationship between reader and author as one where the reader has the power⁷. When students make the connection between their previous knowledge and the present text, they are increasing their comprehension by building upon what they already know. This allows students to create their own understanding rather than allowing the author to tell the student what to think. Textbooks, which schools distribute to students, often share only one perspective. This perspective is many times perceived as the only important perspective when understanding a subject. When this happens to students, they are not able to understand all perspectives and begin to believe in misconceptions. Whether schools are aware of this or not, textbooks often proliferate the ideologies of the dominant culture, making students unaware of different perspectives about various topics⁸.

Taking a critical stance allows the reader to break down the text and envision alternate viewpoints by using their background knowledge to develop an understanding of what they believe as well as what the author is presenting to them⁹. Rosenblatt (2002), as well as other theorists, believe future generations are lacking the critical stance. In classroom's today, more than ever, students are experiencing many different texts and multimedia resources¹⁰. It is vital for them to understand that it is important to read from a critical stance when reading multiple texts. Students, who take a critical stance while reading, will become critical thinkers in their day to day lives outside of the classroom¹¹.

Freire emphasizes that readers not only need to read the text in front of them but also "read the world." The reader must understand that the text is important but not to be manipulated by it¹². To "read the world," critical readers must comprehend beyond the literal level and think about the purpose of the text¹³. Persuasion is often present in texts that students encounter in everyday life so for them to take a text as it is leads them to be controlled by the text they are reading. Readers must be able to analyze and evaluate the texts they read to see the whole picture.

1.2 Critical Literacy In The Classroom: Principles:

McLaughlin and DeVoogd describe four principles that are necessary when implementing critical literacy in the classroom¹⁴. These four principles include the idea of power, understanding the text's problem and complexity, being able to understand critical literacy, and allowing the students to view multiple perspectives. In a classroom, all of these principles are important for students to be able to read from a critical stance.

The first, the principle of power, deals with the idea that whenever someone reads, there is always a power relationship between the author and the reader. The second principle is understanding the text's problem and complexity. Instead of accepting the text placed in front of them, critical readers problematize, or solve a problem that the text presents to them). It is important for students to read from multiple sources because it challenges the students to expand their thinking and discover beliefs and positions they might have not known before¹⁵.

The third principle is the teacher's ability to understand the material and how important the context it is taught in is. When students see their teacher model critical literacy skills, it helps the students to mold into critical readers as well¹⁶. Providing students with the background knowledge that they need in order to understand the text helps the students begin to critically read the text. The teacher can use think-alouds or a read-alouds to model for students what it means to be critically aware. There must be a reflection process and this is where the students are guided to make text to text, text to self, and text to world connections. The fourth principle focuses on allowing the students to examine multiple perspectives. If students are only taught from one perspective, they are not being provided with the whole picture. Reading different points of view of a story or a specific topic provides the multiple perspectives that students need in order to understand as well as formulate their own opinions¹⁷.

Critical literacy can be taught in all grade levels and reach all students, lower level readers as well as gifted readers. Text sets, a collection of 20-25 books on a topic varying in genre and reading level, are used for critical

literacy lessons and can be read by all students¹⁸. Critical literacy is a way to reach all students and engage them in a way that can not only help them as readers but also as citizens of society.

2. Integrating Critical Literacy into Social Studies Instruction:

The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks requires students in the fifth-grade to learn about the American Revolution. Oftentimes, historical topics such as this are taught through a textbook. Textbooks have been criticized as being poorly written, poorly organized and uninviting for students¹⁹. The details within textbooks are limited to facts and often do not help students to develop a comprehensive understanding or paint a picture of an event or topic²⁰. In social studies students learn about the past as well as the present, so this subject is favorable for students to practice questioning and evaluating the sources that they read. Although many times social studies is taught through a textbook, integrating children's literature into the social studies curricula may provide students with new ideas and more well-rounded viewpoints about a historical event that they may not have been previously considered²¹. Furthermore, critical literacy discussions encourage children to better comprehend a text, question what may be missing from the text, and understand content from multiple perspectives. By understanding and questioning what they are reading, they can develop their own view on what took place as well as make real world connections to the life they live today²². After practicing questioning the author, making real world connections, and developing one's own view, these concepts will start to reflect in the students' everyday lives.

This study supports previous research on how children's literature can be incorporated into the social studies curricula²³. In addition, findings from this study address how children's literature enables students to learn about a historical topic, such as the American Revolution, from multiple perspectives. Various ways a teacher can incorporate critical literacy in the classroom and how to facilitate critical literacy discussions are reflected in this study. This study provides intermediate elementary school teachers with a list of children's books and a practical method which can be utilized when teaching about the American Revolution.

The purpose of this study is to examine how reading quality children's literature on the American Revolution from a critical literacy stance influences students' understandings of this historical time period from multiple perspectives. Throughout a fifth-grade unit on the American Revolution, the students will have opportunities to read and explore text sets on the American Revolution. These text sets will each contain children's books that include the perspectives of men, women, young people, Patriots, Loyalists, African American, and Native Americans that lived during this time period.

3. Methodology:

3.1 Research Setting And Participants:

This descriptive, naturalistic study was conducted in a fifth grade classroom in an urban, culturally diverse elementary school in Southeastern Massachusetts. One class of 19 fifth-grade students and their teacher participated in this study. The teacher was currently participating in the Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study (C.A.G.S.) in Reading program at a local university and was familiar with critical literacy and how to facilitate critical literacy discussions.

3.2 Data Collection And Analysis:

From the beginning of May through the end of June, I observed twice a week during their social studies block as they read and explored their textbook, *Our Nation*, an educational website called BrainPOP, and children's literature about the American Revolution. In this study, multiple data collection methods were employed including classroom observations, field notes, pre, mid, and post-assessments, semi-structured student interviews and a collection of artifacts. All of these were used to examine how reading quality children's literature about the American Revolution influences students' understandings of this historical time period when using texts from multiple perspectives.

While the teacher and students engaged in small and whole class critical literacy discussions about the sources they read, I took detailed field notes and digitally recorded the discussions. I later transcribed the discussions verbatim. At the closing of the unit, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the students and asked ten

questions about what they had learned from reading the textbook, listening and viewing BrainPOP and various children's books on the American Revolution as well as their view on the quality of each source. At the final presentations, I video recorded each presentation along with digitally recording it.

After each of my observations, I transcribed the audio recordings and coded them. When analyzing the digital recordings, I specifically analyzed the students' oral responses that occurred during the critical literacy discussions between different students and between teacher and students after reading the sources they used that day. In addition, I analyzed their semi-structured interviews and their pre, mid, and post assessments regarding their understanding of the American Revolution. I used content analysis and the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze the data and look for themes or patterns to emerge from the data. Three themes mentioned here emerged from critical literacy discussions and interview transcriptions addressing how children's literature influenced students to learn about the American Revolution from multiple perspectives.

4. Classroom Research Context:

Before the teacher introduced the unit, she handed out a pre-assessment to see what the students had for background knowledge as well as misconceptions about the American Revolution. The pre, mid and post assessments were identical and had three questions to determine students' knowledge of the American Revolution. The three questions were, "What was the American Revolution", "Why did the American Revolution occur?", and "Who participated in the American Revolution?" On the last question, the students had the choices of Men, Women, Young People, Native Americans, African Americans, Patriots, and British Loyalists. The pre, mid and post assessment results will help us to see if the students learned from the three different sources, the textbook, BrainPOP, and the children's literature

The teacher then introduced the unit with pre-revolutionary war events to help the children build their background knowledge. To explore these events, the students used their textbook, *Our Nation* by Macmillan and McGraw-Hill, and an educational website called BrainPOP. BrainPOP (1999) is a website that is used by teachers and students inside and outside the classroom. The students worked in pairs and used BrainPOP & their textbook to answer the questions on teacher crafted worksheets. During partner work, the students had critical literacy discussions about each of the sources guided by the questions on the teacher crafted worksheet. After each lesson, the teacher engaged the students in a whole class critical literacy discussion.. The teacher provided another teacher crafted worksheet to help the students evaluate BrainPOP and their textbook as sources. After the students had a significant understanding of the events prior to the American Revolution, the teacher handed out the same pre-assessment as their mid-assessment. This assessment assessed the knowledge of the students after using their textbook and BrainPOP. After viewing the responses from the mid-assessment, we realized the open-response answers had more details from the pre-assessment but the answers to the question about who participated, remained the same. The students demonstrated that they understood why the American Revolution occurred by using words such as *taxes, acts, colonists, and rebelled*.

Following the mid-assessment, the teacher provided the students with quality children's literature to learn about the American Revolution. The students worked in groups of four. In these groups, they were given a text set, or set of children's books, and were asked to determine what perspective the books were providing²⁴. There were six text sets, each containing one to five children's books. Each set was labeled with a number one to six on a post-it note and took on one of the following perspectives of the war: Young People, African Americans, Women, Patriots, British and Native Americans. The teacher gave the text sets to her students without acknowledging which perspective each contained, so they had to decide which perspective each of the text sets portrayed. The teacher provided them again with a teacher crafted worksheet that helped scaffold their thinking on critical literacy by asking the questions, "Whose point of view are these books mostly from?" "What was the war like for this group of people?" "Are any other points of view shown?" "If yes, whose?" "Whose points of view are missing that you think should be shown?" This guidance helped the students to read the literature from a critical stance and complete the worksheet for all the text sets. Each day the students read from a different text set to gain an understanding of different perspectives.

After the students had the opportunity to examine each of the text sets, the teacher explained the final project to the students. The final project was to work in a small group and focus in-depth on one of the perspectives shared in the text sets. The students picked which perspective they wanted to further examine based on what they enjoyed reading about the most. On the final day of the unit, each group of three to four students presented their poster as well as what they learned about the perspective to the class. The students in the audience listened attentively and

asked thoughtful questions at the end of each presentation. The questions stimulated a thorough classroom critical literacy discussion between the students and the teacher. After the group presentations, the students took the same assessment again as their post-assessment.

5. Findings:

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrated how students’ understanding of the American Revolution changed over the course of this literature based unit. Students demonstrated these understandings throughout the process during whole class and small group critical literacy discussions, teacher and student conversations, interviews, pre and post assessments, and final project presentations. Three themes emerged within the student’s responses from the critical literacy discussions and interview transcriptions including: evaluating texts from multiple sources, evolving understandings over the course of the unit, and developing a whole picture through multiple perspectives. First, the students were able to critically evaluate texts from multiple perspectives by noticing biases; looking at multiple forms of texts such as their textbook, BrainPOP and children’s literature; and evaluate what perspectives and information each text was able to provide for them as critical readers. Second, the students’ understanding of who was involved in the American Revolution evolved over the course of the unit. The student’s perspectives about the American Revolution developed and changed. Finally, by critically reading and discussing the texts about the American Revolution, students were able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the time period from multiple perspectives. Students were able to see the American Revolution through multiple perspectives, gain knowledge of information they had not known prior, and related to this historical event within its rich context.

5.1 Pre And Post Assessment Results:

The students took a pre assessment at the beginning of the unit, an assessment in the middle of the unit, as well as a post assessment Below is a graph of the student responses to the pre, mid, and post assessments that illustrate the students’ developed understanding of the participants within the American Revolution. The students showed great improvement in their understanding of who participated in the American Revolution and the different roles that these groups of people played.

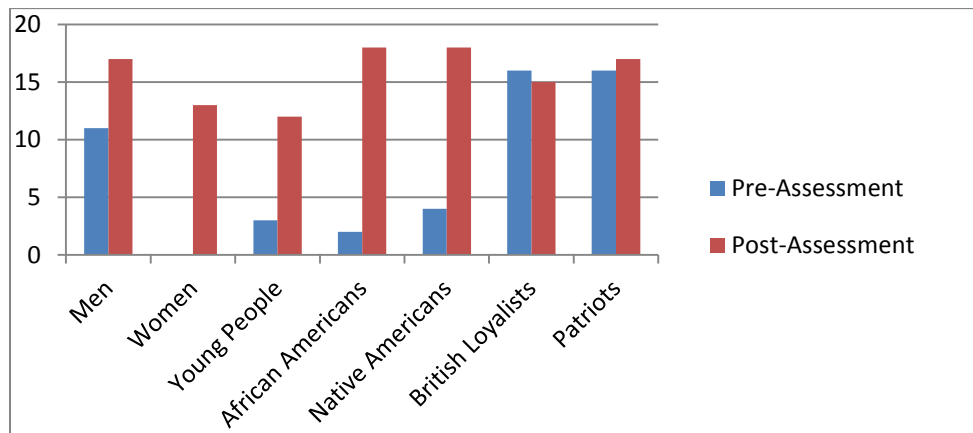


Figure 1. Pre, mid, and post assessment results. This figure illustrates the results of the pre, mid, and post assessments to the question, “Who was involved in the American Revolution?”

The pre-assessment demonstrated that all of the students knew the American Revolution was a war but only a little more than 50% knew that it was a war between America and England. Less than 50% of the students understood that the war was to fight for America’s freedom. The pre-assessment also illustrated that students believed that only male British Loyalists and male Patriots were involved in the American Revolution. On the pre assessment, only 21% of students thought that Native Americans were involved in the American Revolution compared to on the post assessment when 95% of students understood that Native Americans were involved in the war (See Figure 1). All of the students carried the misconception that women didn’t participate at all in the war. The pre-assessments allowed

us to guide the student's learning moving forward and to hopefully change the misconceptions that some students may have had about the war.

As the students further engaged with the children's books within the text sets, so did their perspective on who participated in the war. The post-assessment took place after the students had explored all of the six categories of children's literature and after the final presentations. The results proved that after reading the children's literature, their understanding of who participated in the American Revolution greatly increased. The results demonstrate that over the course of the unit, using three different sources, as well as having small group and whole class critical literacy discussions, the students were able to understand the whole picture of the American Revolution by exploring multiple perspectives.

5.2 Student Responses:

Among the student responses, three themes emerged; evaluating texts from multiple perspectives, evolving understandings over the course of the unit, and developing the whole picture through multiple perspectives.

5.2.1 *evaluating texts from multiple perspectives:*

This theme emerged when analyzing the teacher and student conversations during critical literacy discussions and the student interviews. The students were able to evaluate their textbook, BrainPOP, and the children's literature selections in order to develop an understanding the multiple perspectives of women, young people, men, Native Americans, African Americans, British Loyalists and Patriots of the American Revolution. The students evaluated each of the texts based off of the different perspectives of the war presented. For instance, during a classroom discussion, the teacher and students evaluated the textbook from multiple perspectives. The teacher asked:

Teacher: Tell me about it. Our textbook...how did we feel about our textbook as a source?

Student: I don't want to use it anymore.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Because it's always coming from the colonists' side or perspective. It doesn't really talk about how the British felt or how they didn't like it.

Teacher: So it was pretty biased. But did you learn a lot from the colonist's point of view?

Student: Yes.

The students recognized that the textbook did not show all perspectives. Together, during a class discussion, they decided that the textbook only showed the colonists' point of view. The point of view that the textbook showed could be a reason why the majority of students still believed on the mid-assessment that only male British Loyalists and American Patriots were involved in the war.

During a semi-structured interview, one student enthusiastically explained that children's literature helped him to have a better understanding of the American Revolution. When asked which source (textbook, BrainPOP, and children's literature) he found the most helpful, he expressed that he would use children's books in the future:

Researcher: Which source did you feel you could see the whole story of the American Revolution with?

Student: I'd still stick with children's books.

Researcher: Children's books. How come?

Student: Because one specific book, *Everybody's Revolution*, has a whole different perspective. It gives the British, it gives the colonists, it gives the Native Americans and it gives the Indians and it shows how the Native Americans joined the colonist's side and how the British tried to come and bribe them and they get into a huge fight. I realize that *George vs. George* gave both perspectives and how they both were kind of similar. They both had farms and they both had kids.

This student made connections to the texts in the young people text set as well as the British Loyalists text set. He read these sets and specifically recalled important details from the children's books that helped him to develop his understanding that there were multiple perspectives of the Revolutionary War. This student would not have been aware of these connections if he did not read the children's literature.

5.2.2 evolving understandings over the course of the unit:

During the American Revolution unit, the students' simplistic understanding of the American Revolution evolved to a more comprehensive understanding of the American Revolution and its participants. This theme was prevalent during small group and whole class critical literacy discussions. After reading the children's literature, the students became self-aware of their misconceptions. One student's perspective changed after reading the British perspective through the children's literature. During an interview the student responded:

"I am on the British side now because I don't think that the colonists should have over reacted that much. Like dumping all of their tea into the ocean. I also thought it was a bad thing because they are basically polluting the water. I also thought that boycotting was kind of bad and could have ruined the government right at that moment and lost thousands and thousands of dollars. And I said in my writing that the British have an empire scattered across the whole world so they need to get money and supplies to keep those people around the world safe and get them protection."

If this student hadn't read the children's books addressing the British perspective of the war, he would not have been able to develop his own opinion about the American Revolution. Students' evolved understandings were also evident when listening to the students in small groups critically discuss the texts they were reading. During a small group discussion, the teacher discussed with a student about Deborah Sampson, an important female figure in the American Revolution:

[Teacher: If you think that it is interesting that Molly Pitcher fired a gun, then you will be very surprised at what Deborah Sampson did. Go over and ask Rebecca about Deborah Sampson....] (Elizabeth goes over and asks her classmate, Rebecca, about Deborah Sampson and then returns to her small group.)

Elizabeth: I think she either cut her hair or put it into her helmet. And she disguised herself as a boy.

Teacher: Why did she have to disguise herself as a boy?

Elizabeth: Because she was going into the war. So they wouldn't know and they didn't let women in war.

Teacher: Okay, so now I want you to think, put yourself in her perspective. Now imagine that you're in the Revolutionary War, she was obviously very passionate about it, but they said, "Oh you're a girl. You can't be in it". How are you going to feel?

Elizabeth: Mad.

Teacher: Yea!

Elizabeth: Because you know what, I can do this!

Teacher: Absolutely! She pretended that she was a boy so she could get out there and fight! I thought you might find her very interesting.

This student was able to explore a woman's perspective through the children's literature as well as connect to her feelings to develop a full understanding of how this woman may have felt during the American Revolution.

5.2.3 developing the whole picture through multiple perspectives:

This theme emerged when examining students' final project presentations, interviews, and small group discussions. By the end of the unit, the students had developed a comprehensive or whole picture of the American Revolution by reading about the different people that participated in the war. Their knowledge also grew after hearing their peers present their final projects. A group of students presented on the African American's perspective of the war and explained to the class how the British made promises to them but didn't keep them. The group also explained that many of the African Americans did not make it because they were used in the front lines. After the presentation, during the whole class discussion the teacher asked:

Teacher: So overall was it a pleasant experience for the African Americans during the American Revolution?

Student: No it wasn't pleasant because they were tricked, fooled, and used in the war.

Just to try and win the war. And they didn't even win so they had to stay with the British instead of going back to their families.

Initially, students thought that only male British Loyalists and male Patriots were involved. Now, the students understood that there were multiple perspectives and people involved in the war. By reading the children's literature, students were able to explore the idea that African Americans were involved in the American Revolution. The students read that some women even fought in the war. In their small group, the students looked at the women of the American Revolution text set and explored the women's impact on the war:

Student 1: I think [the women] were trying to help (*Student 2: They were definitely trying to help.*) I think they wanted to be in the war but couldn't.

Student 2: I think Molly Pitcher wanted to be in the war.

Student 3: And Sybil is riding her horse.

Student 2: Yeah, she's riding her horse. And I think that Molly Pitcher really wanted to fight in the war because on the cover illustration, it looked like she is fighting in this.

After reading about the women who participated in the American Revolution, the students were able to develop a better understanding of the whole picture of the war. They understood that although women wanted to fight in the war they couldn't but they helped in many ways.

6. Discussion:

The findings from this study reflect and extend the literature addressed by previous critical literacy researchers²⁵. The teacher's facilitation of critical literacy experiences within her classroom demonstrated McLaughlin and DeVoodgd's (2004) four principles necessary for implementing successful critical literacy experiences. Like McLaughlin and DeVoodgd's (2004) suggested, the teacher and student addressed the idea of power within the texts. The relationship between reader and author is a powerful one and through critical literacy discussions, the students in this research study explored their relationships with many different authors. The students and teacher addressed the issue of power when the students evaluated texts from multiple perspectives. The students asked questions about who the author was, when the text was written, and what the text was trying to portray to the reader. By evaluating the texts and having small group and whole class critical literacy discussions, the students were able to develop a whole picture of the American Revolution through multiple perspectives.

From the results of the student's responses, interviews and final projects, critical literacy proved to be a successful way for all students to gain knowledge and explore their own perspectives on the American Revolution. By allowing the students to explore the American Revolution using critical literacy discussions, the students were able to view themselves as critical readers and analyze and interpret information in their own way. Critical literacy discussions are important for teachers and students to participate in because everyone is able to reflect on what has been presented and share their conclusions. Varying the types of discussions and having the teacher model critical reading and thinking, like this teacher did, allows each student to question the sources and for their perspective to be heard and discussed with peers. After students are more comfortable having critical literacy discussions in the classroom, they would likely demonstrate this behavior in the outside world.

By guiding students to engage in critical literacy, students will view media and texts from different perspectives and not be afraid to ask questions or challenge what the author has presented. The students understand that what is presented in front of them may just be one perspective and that in order to understand the whole picture they will need to explore a variety of texts. The text sets used in the classroom provided each student with the appropriate challenges because of the various levels of text available in the text sets. Text sets can be used across all subject areas while multiple perspectives can be practiced in social studies and language arts instruction. Critical thinking and incorporating informational texts into the literacy and content area curriculum are a large part of the Common Core State Standards.

For students to gain a full understanding of critical literacy, it is important for the teacher to have a full understanding of critical literacy. When the students have a strong role model to build off of, the better the experience is for the students to understand what critical discussions look like and what questions critical readers ask. The teacher must also provide multiple perspectives for the students to explore. The teacher should be knowledgeable of all the perspectives of the topic being discussed and prepared to use reliable and informational for the students to build their viewpoints.

Overall, critical literacy is a practice that has proved to be successful for both students and teachers. Students feel a sense of independence by exploring and creating their own point of view rather than just being told what to think or write. Critical thinking should be encouraged by the teacher for the students to practice outside the classroom. By doing so, students will become more active members of society. Students and teachers can benefit from such experiences and apply them inside the classroom as well as incorporate it into their everyday life.

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