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Thinking for Critical Literacy in the Primary Classroom

Christina Hvitfeldt

I recently gave a paper at a regional seminar in Singapore on the need for introducing argumentative thinking, a vital component of critical literacy, into the primary school language arts programme. During the discussion period which followed, participants from Singapore, Malaysia, India and Indonesia expressed concern that Asian parents and teachers, most of whom expect children to be obedient and deferential, would not welcome such an emphasis in the classroom.

Becker (1991) suggests that this negative attitude toward argumentation in the school setting is at least partially due to the fact that age has generally been equated with authority within Asian traditions. Mr Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister of Singapore, expressed the view of many parents and teachers when he stated in a recent speech: "We must not unthinkingly drift into attitudes and manners which undermine the

traditional politeness and deference Asian children have for their parents and elders." (*International Herald Tribune*, 1994, August 23, p. 3).

Becker also suggests that within traditional Chinese culture, argument is to be avoided because it requires direct confrontation. "Taking opposite sides of an argument necessarily meant becoming a personal rival and antagonist of the one who held the other side . . . If one did not wish to become a lifelong opponent of someone else, he would not venture an opinion contrary to the other person's opinions in public." (p. 236)

Clearly, reading and writing and the ways in which these acts are understood reflect the cultural values and the everyday needs of a society. Langer (1993) calls literacy culture-specific, suggesting that "there is no right or wrong literacy, just the one that is, more or less, responsive to the demands of a particular culture." (p. 201) When

a society changes, it is natural that its literacy will need to change as well in order to adapt to new requirements. This is apparent throughout Asia, where the demands of the workplace are rapidly changing due to new technologies and sophisticated information systems. To respond to these new demands, schools are increasingly called upon to put greater emphasis on critical literacy, logical reasoning, problem solving and flexible thinking, skills that are becoming necessary even in entry-level jobs. During a recent interview, Mrs. Kam Kum Wone, Director of Research and Testing for Singapore's Ministry of Education, stated that "our students are very good in memory work and answering recall kinds of questions. But generally, they perform less well in questions that require reasoning or analytical skills. We should build on critical thinking skills. Teachers will have to think of approaches to get our students to think more, analyze more." (*The Sunday Times*,

28 August 1994, p. 14).

Applebee, Langer & Moll (1985) suggest that critical literacy begins when students take an active role in the reading comprehension process. "To foster higher-level literacy skills is to place new and special emphasis on thoughtful, critical elaboration of ideas and understandings drawn from the material students read and from what they already know. They must learn to value their own ideas and to defend as well as question their interpretations in face of alternative or opposing points of view." (p. 8). Norris (1985) emphasizes that, above all, "one must have the disposition to think productively and critically about issues, or else no amount of skill in doing so will be helpful." (p. 40)

The question which remains is whether educators really want their students to think, to question and to argue in defense of their opinions. In most classrooms, teachers continue to favour the children who sit quietly, don't ask too many questions, accept as truth what they are told and give the expected answers. Many teachers express concern that their authority will be undermined if children are encouraged to become more critical and questioning, having concluded that teaching for 'critical literacy' and maintaining 'traditional values' in the classroom are incompatible. Yet I believe that teachers can help students develop their own interpretations of what they read, elaborate upon the ideas and information they draw from their reading, and put forth reasons to defend their points of view in ways which are culturally acceptable. We can help our students to develop critical literacy, including argumentative thinking, using methods which emphasize discussion and collaboration and minimize confrontation.

Critical literacy through stories

Fisher (1987) calls a good story "a kind of investigation, an adventure in thinking and imagination" and claims that "all stories need thinking about, need to be recreated in our own imaginations. The response we have to stories tells us as much about ourselves as it does about the story; it offers us clues about our own lives." (p. 42) He suggests that fairy tales, in particular, appeal to children because they often have turning points where the main character must make crucial decisions that seem to be wrong at the time but somehow turn out right at the end.

In *Sleeping Beauty* one of these turning points concerns the decision of the parents - should they tell their daughter about the danger of spinning wheels in the hope that she will avoid them, or should they not tell her and simply destroy every spinning wheel they can find? This is the sort of question that can fruitfully be discussed at all ages, and one that can be applied to many of life's dangers. In *Jack and the Beanstalk* -- would you have swapped a cow for a handful of magic beans, or climbed a beanstalk into the sky? In *Hansel and Gretel* -- how would you have found your way out of an unknown wood, and would you go into a stranger's house even if it was made of sweets? There is a wealth of material in traditional tales to stimulate discussion and problem solving. Could you, like the *Three Little Pigs*, build houses out of straw, wood and brick and how would they stand up to the wolf's fierce breath? How would you have raised the *Enormous Turnip* from the ground? How would you have rescued *Rapunzel* from the Tower?" (p. 44)

Whatever the story, class discussion which encourages young

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children to share the thoughts and emotions that their reading has aroused stimulates thinking and enriches the reading experience. Speculating about alternative ways to solve the characters' problems provides an opportunity for children to produce ideas, provide reasons, explore implications and predict outcomes. It also provides a springboard for writing.

Commeyras (1993:489) describes the use of Dialogical-Thinking Reading Lessons in which students read and discuss a story that contains an issue or question that can be considered from more than one point of view. For Sheila Greenwald's *The Hot Day*, for example, the teacher wrote the following on the chalkboard:

Central question: Why did Mr. Peretz run away and never come back?

Side A: Mr. Peretz was scared.

Side B: Mr. Peretz was angry.

The students were then invited to choose one of the positions and explore reasons to support it. They came up with the following:

Side A: Mr. Peretz was scared.

- 1 Because he thought they were ghosts.
- 2 Because he thought a bomb went off.
- 3 Because the children yelled at him.

Side B: Mr. Peretz was angry.

- 1 Because the children broke into his room and made it cold.
- 2 Because the children came into his room without permission.
- 3 Because the children wasted talcum powder.

Class discussion then centered on which reasons were true, which were relevant, and which provided

the strongest support for the conclusion. Finally, the children were given an opportunity to say what they believed as a result of all the thinking they had done on the topic, either orally or in writing. Commeyras suggests that children always be allowed to say they have not made up their minds, as knowing when to withhold judgement is an important element of critical literacy.

Mohr, Nixon & Vickers (1988) maintain that a good way to give upper primary children meaningful opportunities to participate in activities that require higher-order thinking skills is to use their favourite books. Their *Thinking Activities for Books Children Love* contains discussion guides for fifteen books chosen as favourites by children in Primary Three through Six. Each guide contains chapter questions which focus on knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The guides present an organized sequence of thinking activities that can be used with the whole class, small groups, paired or independent readers. The guides also encourage creative problem solving, as in the following pre-reading question on Sheila Burford's *The Incredible Journey*:

A Siamese cat, an old bull terrier, and a young Labrador retriever attempt to travel back home over three hundred miles of Canadian wilderness. They have been purely domestic animals never even attempting to hunt their own food. What will they have to do to be successful in reaching their destination? (p. xiii)

The chapter guides for each of the fifteen books provide excellent models for the formulation of questions which demand various

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levels of thinking. The questions can be used in a variety of ways for discussion or for writing.

Another approach is taken by Matthew Lipman and his colleagues at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, who have produced a series of children's story books and teachers' guides to help children develop cognitive skills within a reading, reasoning and language arts programme. The beginning book, *Pixie* (Lipman & Sharp, 1989), is geared to a Primary Three reading level. It begins:

Now it's my turn! I had to wait so long for the others to tell their stories! I'll start by telling you my name. My name is Pixie. Pixie's not my real name. My real name my father and mother gave me. Pixie's the name I gave myself.

How old am I? The same age you are. (p. 4)

The teachers' guide for *Pixie* (Lipman & Sharp, 1989) provides discussion questions and exercises to stimulate thinking about each chapter. The discussion plan for chapter one focuses on names and includes the following:

- 1 Do you have more than one name? Explain.
- 2 Do your parents call you by the same name as your friends call you?
- 3 Do you use your name when you talk to yourself?
- 4 If you didn't have a name, would it matter to you?
- 5 If you had a different name, would it matter to you?
- 6 If you had a different name, would you be a different person?
- 7 Can you think of a name you would rather have than the one you have?
- 8 If people wanted to, could they re-name everything in the world?

- 9 Can people's names be bought and sold?
- 10 Is it possible that, as people grow older, they get to look more and more like their names? (p. 4)

The teachers' guide provides good models for the development of questions that have no single correct answer. These questions give children an opportunity to develop their own opinions and come up with reasons to support their points of view either orally or in writing.

Critical literacy through talk about thinking

An important part of teaching for critical literacy is helping children become responsible for their own thinking. To help them become aware of their own thinking and that of others, we need to teach them how to *talk* about thinking. Fisher (1987) suggests that talking about thinking can help children to avoid some of the following problems:

- errors of perception (it's right because part of it is right)
- egocentric thinking (it's right because I think it is right)
- trusting first judgments (it's right because it looks right)
- trusting others' judgments (it's right because he/she says so)
- distrusting others' judgments (it's right because you're wrong)
- errors of logic (faulty arguments, arguing from the irrelevant) (p.12)

In order to engage in critical literacy, children must learn to recognize their own biases. We can help students to see what they already know by encouraging them to share ideas through discussion and develop criteria for evaluation of their opinions through collaborative group work. Block

(1993) contends that group work is particularly important in the development of critical literacy because it provides students an opportunity to talk about reasoning and, in doing so, uncover their own metacognitive processes. She suggests that group collaboration helps students to identify their own errors in reasoning by giving them the chance to see how their reasons differ from those of their peers. Students are then in a position to develop strategies to 'repair' their thinking.

Critical literacy through reflective writing

Although the writing of narratives is the most common form of writing in the primary school, children should also be encouraged to use writing to explore their thinking and develop their abilities to reason and solve problems. This kind of writing demands processes such as abstracting general principles, making inferences and deductions and speculating on possible causes, effects and reasons. To provide opportunities for this kind of thinking and writing, Fisher (1987:71) recommends questions which prompt speculation, such as: What if

- plants started to walk?
- you were turned into a frog?
- the oceans all dried up?
- you were really given three wishes?
- you were allowed to run the school?
- you discover your best friend is a thief?

Bicknell (1987) suggests the use of "Think Books," in which children are encouraged to write about their own concerns and ideas. In his experience with middle primary students, Bicknell has found that

they most often write about the things they don't understand or have just discovered. He offers the following example from the Think Book of Alan, age ten:

I don't understand why black people are black and white people are white. I think it might be because when we were cave men that some of them lived in hot parts of the world and others lived in cold parts but I thought that the world was cold then, so why are some people different colours to other people? (p. 66)

In addition to encouraging writing about thinking, Think Books provide opportunities for teachers to suggest to children how they might go about finding answers to the questions they raise, helping them to develop strategies for problem solving.

Block (1993) suggests that biography and autobiography can be used to good advantage in the development of critical literacy. She recommends that children read about famous people who were born on their birthdays, then discuss or write about what it would have been like to have been that person's best friend. The students then write their own autobiographies, using parents and grandparents as sources of information. Next, the children pair up with a friend and each writes a biography of the other. When they compare the autobiographies to the biographies, the children are asked to explain the differences between their own perceptions and the perceptions of others and the consequent differences in the autobiographical and biographical genres.

Conclusion

To help students develop the

critical literacy skills they will need to meet the demands of a changing world, we must encourage them to think for themselves. We can begin by asking them to reflect upon their own ideas and present those ideas to their peers. We can promote thinking by asking questions which require students to examine their assumptions or extend their thinking into new areas. When discussing stories, we can ask questions to help students interpret information and generate hypotheses. We can ask them to state opinions, give reasons for those opinions and come up with criteria for evaluating their reasons. We can talk about thinking and help students to monitor their own reasoning. When students write, we can encourage the thoughtful elaboration of ideas, the consideration of cause and effect, and the application of principles to new situations. We can do all this in an atmosphere of collaboration, where children work together to reason things out.

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