

# Critical Literacy: Changing the World through the Word

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## Abstract

*This study analyzes the role that children's literature plays in acquiring critical tools and deconstructing the internalized sense of worthlessness and oppression that Latinos living in poverty might experience. The goal is to provide literacy spaces and critical tools for both, teachers and students from marginalized and oppressed backgrounds, as Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo suggest, to become aware of one's reality and act upon our world. This intends to engage students in dialogue and reflection, in order to critically analyze and understand issues of social, economic and political injustice and inequities; and deconstruct their internalized sense of worthlessness and oppression. The outcome of the study is to provide bilingual educators with literature resources, such as a collection of literature in Spanish and reflection suggestions, aimed to promote action, transformation and social justice within a community of learners.*

At a young age, I succumbed to the messages posed at my schools, by the mass media, and in the community at large, which led me to believe that I had less value than my White counterparts. I was convinced that for me to succeed, I had to give up my identity. I was made to feel like a second-class citizen because of my socioeconomic status and my Spanish language and because I lived in a run-down community (p. 118).

—Margarita Berta-Ávila, 2003

## Introduction and Review of Literature

Margarita Berta-Ávila's experience as a Latina growing up in the United States is similar to that of many young Latinos in this country. Sixty one percent of Latino children that live in poverty (reported by the National Center for Children in Poverty in 2007) might experience the same internalized sense of oppression such as Margarita Berta-Ávila, as a result of the social, historical and political marginalization that Latinos have encountered in the United States. In regards to issues of race, class, culture and language, some Latinos have been conditioned to believe that they lack the power and voice to claim a just and equitable standard of living. This sense of worthlessness and hopelessness can be defined as internalized oppression, which affects individuals who have been socially and politically alienated, excluded and discriminated. As Mahan (2002, p. 49) states:

If SG [subordinated groups] members begin to believe that they have no control over their lives and lack the capacity for autonomy, they may begin to show the passive behavior known as learned helplessness. If they experience shame due to being viewed as second-class citizens or less than real Americans, SG members may, in a paradoxical manner, simultaneously believe and not believe that they are inferior. PMA [persons of Mexican ancestry] may even become ashamed of being identified with the Mexican ethnic group (p. 296).

According to existing research, some students from Latino communities have been led to believe that they are helpless, inferior and powerless upon their life and reality (Berta-Ávila, 2003; Mahan, 2002). Stereotypes portrayed in the media and society at large have contributed to negative self-perceptions and lack of confidence in some Latino children: "Those at the receiving end of prejudice can experience physical and psychological harm, and over time, they internalize and act on negative perceptions about themselves and other members of their own group"

(qtd. in Padilla, 2004, p. 15-16). Ada (2003) claims that living in poverty may be another factor contributing to the sense of hopelessness that some Latinos experience:

Because some Latinos live in conditions of extreme economic poverty, they suffer from the social illnesses that plague our economically deprived neighborhoods, where people might not see hope of a better future and might internalize a sense of worthlessness society projects unto them (p. 52).

As a result of living under such social, economic and political stressors, some Latino children may become passive and oblivious to injustices and inequities in their lives. For some Latino children, this leads them to believe that what they experience is a product of their predestined fate. And at this point, they run the risk of conforming to an oppressive reality. The illustration below (Figure 1) describes the issue of internalized oppression as a spiral which confines marginalized individuals into a perpetual cycle of injustice, internalized oppression and conformity.

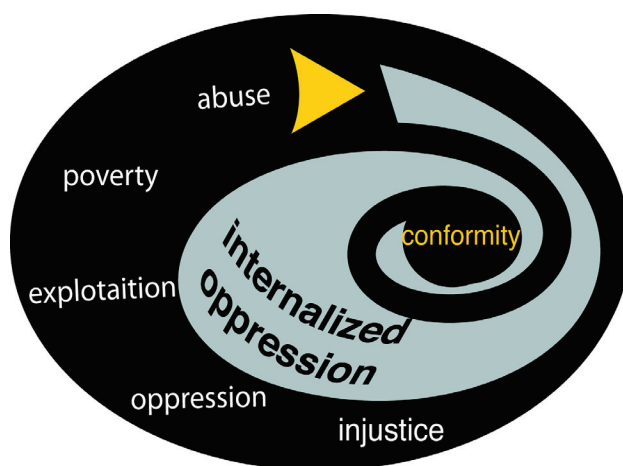


Figure 1.

The question that we must ask ourselves as educators, is how can we break this cycle of oppression? As Berta-Ávila (2003, p. 120-1) has observed “This false consciousness produces passive, non-critical students. Within this passivity, Xicanas/Xicanos [Chicanas/Chicanos] do not question injustices or inequalities they experience as individuals or as a community.” How can educators guide Latino students to acquire a critical view of their world? Most important, how can educators guide Latino students to challenge the existing structures of inequality and oppression that subordinate them, in order to deconstruct their internalized sense of oppression?

One approach is a transformative and critical pedagogy, where children are informed about their human rights and given the necessary tools to demand them. When literacy is viewed as a critical stance, it becomes a process that precedes words, and stresses the importance of acquiring the skills to decode, encode and recode the world. As Freire and Macedo (1987) propose, literacy is an approach to attain “a critical reading of reality” (p. 36), by reading the world within words, in order to understand it and transform it. Reading the world means to understand how human practices and social, political and economic systems influence and manipulate history, language, culture, and society to accentuate privilege for some and take away the humanity of many. The written word is a tool that can be used to explore and critically analyze the world. Thus, the act of reading the word and the world can serve as an instrument to guide students to challenge existing structures of inequality and oppression. Freire (1970, p. 47) explains that “To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.”

Critical literacy goes beyond critically analyzing and understanding texts. It is a process that works with the written language in order to bring to light social injustices and inequities that take place in the world. Besides reading the written word, this approach to literacy focuses on leading students to “recognize various tensions and enable them to deal effectively with them” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 49) by providing them with spaces for dialogue to understand and critically interpret their reading of the world. Within these spaces, students have the opportunity to challenge their reality and explore new alternatives for transforming it. Shor and Pari (1999) suggest:

Critical literacy thus challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for social and self-development. This kind of literacy – words rethinking worlds, self dissenting in society – connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for reinventing our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity. (p. 1)

The reading of the word and the world can take place through powerful texts that address or portray concerns that affect the lives and self-perceptions of some Latino students. As educators, it is our ethical duty “to intervene in challenging students to critically engage with their world so they can act upon it and on it” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 10). This being said, as educators it is crucial that we talk about issues of social inequity and injustice in order to guide our students to learn and reflect about them, so that they can identify the issues that oppress them and decide to act on them (Shor, 1992). Critical literacy is a pedagogical tool that empowers and encourages students from oppressed backgrounds to believe in their own power and voice.

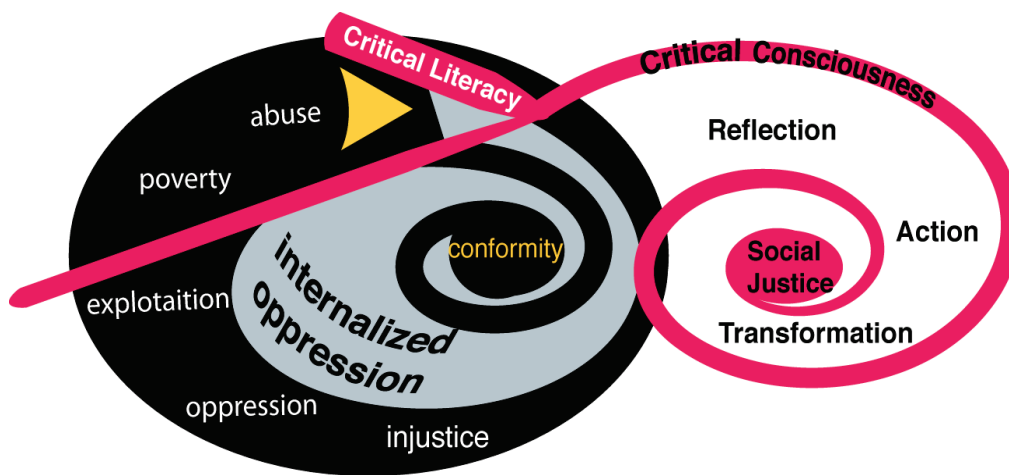


Figure 2.

Critical literacy challenges the status quo. When educators present marginalized children with powerful literature and guide them through dialogue and reflection, they have the opportunity to discover a new path to breaking free from the cycle of internalized oppression (Figure 2). The model on the left illustrates how critical literacy intercepts the cycle of internalized oppression, to create a path of critical consciousness and transformation.

Educators and Latino students can engage in dialogue and reflection about topics of social injustice and oppression by analyzing literature that connects to the students’ lives and reality. Research has identified children’s literature as a powerful way to “stir our emotions and create recognition of our collective humanity and of our potential to create history” (Furumoto, 2008, p.79). When the texts, stories and characters relate to students’ cultural backgrounds and more important, to their experiences in the world, students have the opportunity to engage in dialogue that addresses situations of social injustice and inequity. In addition, through such connections with the literature, students also find examples and “models for what they can do when faced with difficult life situations, the need to make a moral decision, the necessity to make a choice, or the opportunity to make their own decisions and thus create their own path” (Ada, 2003, p.10).

### Purpose

A dialogue with Macedo, Freire (1995) explains the need for the oppressed to “develop the necessary critical tools that will enable them to read their world so they can apprehend the globality of their reality and choose what world they want for themselves” (Freire & Macedo, 1995). The purpose of this study is to create a literacy curriculum resource in Spanish for bilingual educators, so that they make use of critical tools that can enable students to read both the word and the world. This curriculum resource promotes dialogue and reflection about selected children’s literature in Spanish that portrays issues of social inequity and injustice.

It is impossible to think, however, of overcoming oppression, discrimination, passivity, or pure rebellion without first acquiring a critical comprehension of history in which these intercultural relations take place in a dialectical form. Thus, they are contradictory and part of a historical process. Second, we cannot think of overcoming oppression without political pedagogical projects that point to the transformation of the reinvention of the world (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 13).

The goal of this curriculum resource is to create a space for dialogue and reflection in order for students to:

- Critically analyze and understand issues of social, economic and political injustice and inequities.
- Deconstruct internalized sense of worthlessness and oppression.
- Create a space for alternative paths for self-growth.
- Promote action, transformation and social justice within a community of learners.

The questions then, are: what children’s literature in Spanish can be used to create a space for dialogue and reflection about issues of social inequity and injustice in the lives of Latino students? And, how can educators engage students on a critical reading of their world by using these pieces of literature?

### **Methodology**

In order to create a critical literacy curriculum resource for educators, I collected thirty children’s books in Spanish, which I selected and analyzed using criteria inspired by the concept of critical literacy. A search of databases, libraries, and publishers was used to locate the assortment of children’s literature. One database in particular, The Barahona Center at California State University San Marcos, is dedicated to study books in Spanish for children and adolescents, and has an extensive database of resources. An author, Isabel Schon, has published three volumes of the series *Recommended Books in Spanish for Children and Young Adults* since from 1991 through 2004, which was a very helpful resource. Lastly, two publishers (Ediciones Ekaré and Children’s Book Press) have collections of works that focus on sociopolitical issues and the promotion of social justice. The following criteria were used to select the appropriated books for this study:

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>Plot &amp; Theme</b>     | The plot and theme portray social, economic and political issues, such as oppression, poverty, abuse and exploitation. “The social climate needs to be honestly portrayed in a way that is understandable to children without being overwhelming” (Galda & Cullinan, 2006, p. 242). |
| <b>Language</b>             | Comprehensible and authentic. “Look for language that is true to the characters but is not overwhelmingly archaic or full of dialect” (Galda & Cullinan, 2006, p. 243). Accurate within the story’s background/context. Enriching language.   |
| <b>Presence of conflict</b> | Besides making a story interesting, the presence of conflict gives children the opportunity to understand and be aware of the issues, its causes and its consequences. Thus, providing an example and guidance on how to engage in praxis to confront such conflicts.               |
| <b>Message</b>              | Author’s message goes beyond the words. The message helps the reader learn about a problem in society or in his/her own life. In addition motivates the reader to reflect and act upon such problem.  |
| <b>Illustrations</b>        | Accurately represent the literary and cultural content. “People of the culture are not all portrayed the same, but as individuals” (Kasten, Kristo, & McClure, 2005, p. 132).   |
| <b>Characterization</b>     | The story portrays influential protagonists who can serve as guidance for children who may experience similar situations. The protagonists show a “sense of identity and social consciousness” (Medina & Enciso, 2002, p. 38).  |

After specific books were selected, they were analyzed using Lewison, Fling and Van Sluys' (2002, p. 382) four dimensions of critical literacy: "(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice." The questions for reflection and problem posing were structured based on the following categories:

|                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Social Justice Qualities</b>      | "Is realistic, logical, equitable, just, kind, and generous" (Ada, 2003, p. 14). It might be that some texts portray injustices or stereotypes towards people; in this case the book can be analyzed differently. These books can serve as examples of how social/economical and political issues affect communities and people. It will be used to discover those stereotypes, talk about them, and break them down.  |
| <b>Stereotypes</b>                   | Recognize bias in literature (Kasten et al., 2005)<br>"Stereotypes in literature can perpetuate biases toward individuals who are members of a particular group" (Stoodt-Hill & Amspaugh-Corson, 2009, p. 47).<br>"If young children are repeatedly exposed to biased representations through words and pictures, there is a danger that such distortions will become a part of their thinking, especially if reinforced by societal biases" (AntiDefamation League 2003, p. 1). |
| <b>Gender Roles</b>                  | How are men and women represented? This topic can create space for analysis and reflection about the societal construction of gender roles.  |
| <b>Socioeconomic Class</b>           | Plots that portray issues of socioeconomic class allow for reflection and analysis of how socioeconomic structures manipulate the actions and decisions of people.<br>How are people from different socioeconomic backgrounds represented?   |
| <b>Accuracy and Authenticity</b>     | Portrays the world and situations as accurate and authentic as they are in real life?  |
| <b>Racial &amp; Ethnic Portrayal</b> | Representation of people from different ethnicities and races. It is important to consider the racial and ethnic representation of characters. The theme of the story can portray issues of discrimination and racism within the plot, however, it should never communicate a discriminatory message against any race or ethnicity.  |
| <b>Action / Praxis</b>               | The decision that the protagonists take in order to change the course of the story and solve the pressing conflict. Action steps for social justice (Lewison et al., 2002).  |

The literature in question can be used, as Lewison, Fling and Van Sluys (2002, p. 382) propose, to "disrupt the commonplace" and problematize the status quo in order to study the existing structures of inequity and oppression; to "interrogate multiple viewpoints" with the purpose of reflecting on the power relationships between characters, and the actions they take; to "focus on sociopolitical issues" to analyze how social, political and economic systems affect the standard of living and opportunities of people in society, and "shape perceptions, responses and actions" (p. 383); and by analyzing how the protagonists of the stories engage in praxis to confront the antagonisms that oppress them, students can find examples to follow to challenge the status quo, "take action and promote social justice." As McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004, p. 54) explain: "It is important to note that although these books facilitate critical literacy experiences it is not the reading of these texts that generates critical consciousness but rather the critical analysis and discussion in which we and our students engage."

## Results

After analyzing the literature, several books were selected to create a critical literacy curriculum resource. This collection of literature is intended to provide educators with resources that can be used in bilingual Spanish-English classrooms to promote dialogue and reflection about issues of social justice. The curriculum resource does not contain already-made lesson plans; it provides an annotated bibliography and some suggestions for reflection and dialogue. The curriculum resource is for educators to create lessons and dialogue based on their classroom

environment, culture and most important to adapt it to each student's world. Please see annexed document to access the curriculum resource.

## Conclusion and Future Considerations

Some Latino children are susceptible to internalized oppression, which is caused by living under structures of social and political oppression, and may lead to a sense of worthlessness and hopelessness. As socially aware educators, we need to attempt to break this cycle of oppression. Critical literacy, the concept of reading the world and the word, is a well-known and respected approach to dealing with social issues in the classroom setting. Using guidelines outlined by critical literacy standards and scholarly research, the purpose of this paper was to evaluate an assortment of children's books in an attempt to offer teachers a list of resources they can use in their classrooms. By providing this select reading material, the teacher can encourage dialogue and analysis of these sensitive topics, in an attempt to inform and empower their students. Further considerations for this study will consist on case studies, where the selected critical literacy curriculum resource is used in classroom settings. It would be essential to study Latino students' reactions and interactions with the selected books, and analyze how influential these resources are in acquiring critical consciousness and deconstructing internalized oppression.

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