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Is Early Childhood Education neutral?



A recent study defends the importance of talking about ideology and neutrality in early childhood and analyses whether prospective teachers are in favor of a more democratic and critical education, or whether they consider Critical Literacy to be a neutral position. The results show that, although teachers in training question hegemonic discourses, they do not regard this a political act.

Arasy González Milea, 2018, C.P.R. «Almijara» Sede de Corumbela

From our studies and research on Critical Literacy in education, we've learned that it's a vital tool. It lets us tell the truth from a lie, distinguish between facts and opinions, and sort out opinions about those facts. We found out that it pushes us to look at different viewpoints, verify the truth of our sources, and focus on real social problems in our communities. Just as important, if we spot a social injustice that is being kept alive through texts, we have to take action and help lessen its impact.

This is because, through the lens of Critical Literacy, we understand that all texts—whether spoken, written, or even images and videos—are created by people who have their own experiences and ways of seeing the world. More or less on purpose, these texts always carry a political and ideological message that we need to learn how to identify.

But, should we even be talking about ideology and neutrality with young children? Our answer is a firm yes. Specialized literature and successful teaching experiences show us

that developing Critical Literacy can and should start in pre-school/Kindergarten. Even young children, by taking part in fun, dynamic, and engaging activities, can spot power dynamics and dominating themes in children's stories, cartoons, and images. They can also see and discuss social issues present in the content made for them, like race, immigration, poverty, religious practices, diversity, and more.

That's why, at the University of Málaga, we developed a training program in Critical Literacy for future Early Childhood Education teachers. The goal was to equip them to give children rich learning experiences that lead to the development of critical, active, and involved citizens.

The results were positive, and the experience was valuable, both for the researchers and for the students. The students appreciated the chance to think about Early Childhood Education based on the great abilities and potential of children. Within this big, complex experience, our study looked specifically at how these teachers-in-training understood neutrality, intent, and ideology as they developed Critical Literacy for themselves, and prepared to create powerful lessons for children.

Through this work, we managed to identify both challenges and opportunities in training future pre-school teachers. Their commitment to critically interpreting information and questioning the dominant ideas hidden in texts was clear. However, we noticed they were less certain when presented with a conflict, for example, between the school's political stance/educational plan and the ideological views of the families. When faced with that choice, most preferred to take a neutral position.

Our aim with this research is to achieve strong, long-lasting changes, helping to shape Early Childhood Education teachers into professionals who can truly transform the learning environment.

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