

CRITICAL HISTORICAL IDENTITY: COUNTERING THE CRISIS OF DISENFRANCHISEMENT IN THE LITERACY CURRICULUM

By **Mellissa Gyimah** and **Shawndra Allen**

Crisis in the educational achievement of Black youth, and more specifically Black males, is embedded within the curriculum, pedagogical knowledge, and learning experiences in schools. The evidence of this crisis is present in literacy classrooms in US middle schools and high schools, in which Black males have been systematically disenfranchised. Considerably more attention is devoted to “whiteness” in the curriculum underpinning both new social identities and important aspects of education and educational policy.¹ This accounts for the marginalizing trend in schools. Disenfranchisement and marginalization adversely impact students’ motivation, identity, and academic, social, and emotional development.² This is a crisis that warrants the attention of educators and researchers. To address the crisis of marginalization and disenfranchisement, we present two critical questions:

1. How can in-school literacy influence the developing identities of Black male youth?
2. What approaches can teachers take to create meaningful literacy experiences?

In this article, we discuss curricula, pedagogical knowledge, and learning experiences as three important aspects for nurturing a critical historical identity via texts for Black male youth. We take the position that Black history should be taught as part of the core curriculum with a focus on critical literacy and critical analysis. This focus can lead to a critical historical identity that is currently being compromised due to the overwhelming focus on whiteness in the curriculum and the absence of Black history. Black males must meaningfully engage with texts focused on Black American history to experience history from multiple perspectives. Teaching texts focused on the literate identities of Black males benefits these young males.³

Positioning History and Identity in Curriculum

Since identities are mediated by text, we argue that teachers must use their content and pedagogical knowledge to select and expose youth to multiple-perspective texts, as well as using critical literacy tools to engage students in analyzing their history in relation to their multiple identities and current realities.⁴ Currently, history curricula are often narrow in scope, focusing on well-known figures such as Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, or focusing on slave narratives and Jim Crow—era texts, thereby silencing other rich historical moments, people, and places.⁵ This limits the invaluable exposure that Black male students could gain from broader perspectives and experiences of history.

Multiple scholars speak of identities not only as represented, but also as constructed in and through the stories people tell about themselves and their experiences.⁶ Constructing cultural and historical identities of Black males is suppressed and compromised when Black history stories are foreclosed within American history. It is challenging for Black male youth to be critical of positions they are cast in if they are not given the opportunity to reconcile their identity within their history.⁷

Davies and Harré define positioning as “the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story-lines” and also speak about how “conceptions people have about themselves are disjointed until and unless they are located in a story.”⁸ Thus, texts have the potential to position Black males within the storylines of history. However, the absence of these texts makes it difficult for Black males to locate themselves in historical conversations and in today’s society. Incorporating Black American history text and establishing a strong pedagogical knowledge frame are both essential to engage Black males’ in meaningful exchanges with texts.

Pedagogical Knowledge: Recasting Identity via Critical Literacy Approaches

Even with Black history texts integrated within the curriculum, students will need tools to be able to critically read and write across texts to glean its meaning potential while also paying attention to the specific “positioning” of the text and their academic and personal selves. Therefore, we believe that incorporating variegated Black American history texts into school curricula will lead to stronger literate identities among Black males while also providing a more well-rounded understanding of America and its significant yet unheard voices. Here, critical literacy is important as an approach because it shifts the reader’s role from text decoder, text user, and text meaning maker to text critic.⁹ The critical stance repositions students as active readers of texts that are subjectively embedded with issues of social marginalization, language construction, and privileged versus silenced voices.

Critical literacy is not easy to define. However, its central tenets speak to the identity and literacy development of young readers and the critical pedagogical practices of teachers who use text and media within classroom spaces. Critical literacy is a tool necessary for critically reading and writing about the world, a form of social action that develops people as social agents within a larger culture, and a lens to see beyond the familiar and the comfortable.¹⁰ Therefore, critical literacy is an imperative pedagogical tool for critically engaging with texts in social studies and history classrooms.

Several frameworks have been developed and used to facilitate critical pedagogical strategies in literacy classrooms. Flint, Sluys, and Lewison developed a multidimensional framework that includes four dimensions of critical literacy: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple perspectives, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action to promote social justice. The first dimension is illustrated by looking at the “everyday” from multiple lenses in which unspoken modes of awareness are reconsidered and disrupted. The second and third dimensions call for students to interrogate the perspectives of the characters and reposition themselves in these situations, thereby helping students to critically analyze the voices of those who are being privileged or silenced through the text. Lastly, the fourth dimension calls for social action on the part of the students to challenge social injustices through critical thinking and dialogue.¹¹

While the problem has long been identified, the transformation of a crisis lies within US high schools, middle schools, and literacy classrooms: creative solutions and meaningful literacy experiences can equip youth with the tools and opportunities that enable them to make responsible life choices, critically participate in civic and political processes, and navigate the inevitable challenges they may face in their academic and personal lives in the twenty-first century. A critical pedagogical framework demonstrates and concretizes critical dialogue, problem posing, problem solving, and the requisite skills and attitudes needed for overcoming the challenging life situations associated with poverty, crime, and a lack of equitable educational resources that overrun low-socioeconomic-class neighborhoods.

Conclusion

In our brief discussion, we assert that there is a need for more Black American history content and instruction in order to construct and affirm Black males’ multiple identities and levels of engagement with Black history. Students’ literacy, engagement, and identity are all intertwined. How students are able or unable to locate themselves in text and history can impact them and their sense of identity.¹² It is important that “the focus is on the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in certain ways and yet simultaneously is a resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions.”¹³

This repositioning by teacher and students will allow for a more complex and rich interaction with texts, as new responses and potential responses, as well as meaning, will be made, garnered, and applied by readers.¹⁴ Using the tools of critique and analysis discussed, students should be taught how to be cognizant of their own thoughts and feelings toward the texts, and reflect on their own responses in relation to a text, which affirms identity and experiences, as well as broadens their perspectives. In addition, teachers can utilize a range of critical literacy frameworks to select materials and approach, critique, and deconstruct history in a way that breathes life into the very rich and multiple perspectives of Black American history.

Notes

1. Michael W. Apple, “The Absent Presence of Race in Educational Reform,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 2, no. 1 (1999): 9–16.

2. Ragnar Rommetveit, "On Axiomatic Features of a Dialogical Approach to Language and Mind," in *The Dynamics of Dialogue*, ed. Ivana Marková and Klaus Foppa (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 83–104; Alfred W. Tatum, "Advancing the Literacies of African American Adolescents: A Case Study of Professional Development" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2003).

3. Alfred W. Tatum, "Literacy Practices for African-American Male Adolescents," *Jobs for the Future* (2012); Alfred W. Tatum, "Orienting African American Male Adolescents toward Meaningful Literacy Exchanges with Texts," *Journal of Education* 194, no. 1 (2014); Allison Skerrett and Randy Bomer, "Borderzones in Adolescents' Literacy Practices Connecting Out-of-School Literacies to the Reading Curriculum," *Urban Education* 46, no. 6 (2011): 1256–79.

4. Elizabeth Birr Moje and Allan Luke, "Literacy and Identity: Examining the Metaphors in History and Contemporary Research," *Reading Research Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2009): 415–37; Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré, "Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 20, no. 1 (1990): 43–63.

5. Bena R. Hefflin and Mary Alice Barksdale-Ladd, "African American Children's Literature That Helps Students Find Themselves: Selection Guidelines for Grades K-3," *The Reading Teacher* 54, no. 8 (2001): 810–19; Maayan Schechter, "Black History Should Be Blended Throughout Curriculum" (2013); Porchance' A. White and William Allan Kritsonis, "The Analysis of the Influence of the Consciousness of the History of Various Cultures on Student Achievement," *Online Submission* 16, no. 3 (2006).

6. Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews, eds., *Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense*, Vol. 4 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004); Alexandra Georgakopoulou, *Small Stories, Interaction and Identities*, Vol. 8 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007); Moje and Luke, "Literacy and Identity"; Stanton Wortham, *Learning Identity: The Joint Emergence of Social Identification and Academic Learning* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

7. Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré, "Positioning and Personhood," in *Positioning Theory: Moral Contexts of Intentional Action*, ed. Rom Harré and Luk van Langenhove (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 32–52.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 62.

10. Julie McLeod and Sheri Vasinda, "Critical Literacy and Web 2.0: Exercising and Negotiating Power," *Computers in the Schools* 25, no. 3-4 (2008): 259–74.

11. Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Vol. 1 (London: Bloomsbury, 1973); Stephanie Jones, "Lessons from Dorothy Allison: Teacher Education, Social Class and Critical Literacy," *Changing English* 13, no. 3 (2006): 293–305; Susan Gushee O'Malley, "Critical Teaching and Everyday Life by Ira Shor," *Journal of Education* 163, no. 1 (1981): 93–95.

12. Mitzi Lewison, Amy Seely Flint, and Katie Van Sluys, "Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices," *Language Arts* 79, no. 5 (2002): 382–92.

13. Alfred W. Tatum, "Literacy Practices for African-American Male Adolescents," *Literacy* (2012); Louise M. Rosenblatt, "The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing" (1994).

14. Davies and Harré, "Positioning and Personhood."



Mellissa Gyimah is a doctoral student studying Literacy, Language, and Culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a research assistant. Her research interests include race and reader response, textual lineages of Black students and teachers who instruct those students, including Black texts within the literary canon, and positioning theory. Being Black British, she is concerned with the lack of variegated Black texts that represent Black immigrants, as well as African Americans within the high school literary canon and curricula. She previously taught secondary school English and PE in Dover, UK, before completing her master's in writing and publishing at DePaul University in 2013.

Email: mgyima2@uic.edu



Shawndra Allen is a doctoral student in the Literacy, Language, and Culture program at the University of Illinois at Chicago, as well as a research assistant for the Black Male Early Literacy Impact Project. She earned a bachelor's degree in business and a master's in Curriculum and Instruction from Howard University. Her previous work experience includes 10 years of literacy teaching and learning in DC public schools. In addition to six years of program development experience, she is currently investigating the literacy practices of students of color, both in and out of school contexts. Her research interests are multiliteracies theory, critical literacies, youth identity development, and transformative literacy education.

Email: sallen26@uic.edu

LESSON PLAN:**CRITICAL HISTORICAL IDENTITY: COUNTERING THE CRISIS OF DISENFRANCHISEMENT IN THE LITERACY CURRICULUM**By: **Melissa Gyimah** and **Shawndra Allen****Connections to Middle School and/or High School**

Young people should be offered multiple perspectives of history and major historical events. They must also use a set of tools to properly make sound historical interpretations across traditional and nontraditional texts such as online and digital media. Using a mixture of research, writing, and technology will enable young people to critically compare competing historical narratives, recognize the tentative nature of historical interpretations, and hypothesize the influence of the past.

Goals of Lesson Plan

Enable learners to analyze and explain the ways groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns; guide learners as they predict how data and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference; and use appropriate digital media platforms to research, design, and present a critical historical argument in the form of a counternarrative, alternative perspective, or form of action.

Objectives

At the end of this unit students will be able to investigate multiple historical perspectives, create counternarratives to include multiple perspectives, and design and present alternative interpretations of historical events.

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards:**History: Teacher Expectations**

- Assist learners in developing historical research capabilities that enable them to formulate historical questions, obtain historical data, question historical data, identify the gaps in available records, place records in context, and construct sound historical interpretations;
- Help learners to identify issues and problems in the past, recognize factors contributing to such problems, identify and analyze alternative courses of action, formulate a position or course of action, and evaluate the implementation of that decision;
- Guide learners in practicing skills of historical analysis and interpretation, such as compare and contrast, differentiate between historical facts and interpretations, consider multiple perspectives, analyze cause and effect relationships, compare competing historical narratives, recognize the tentative nature of historical interpretations, and hypothesize the influence of the past.

Culture and Cultural Diversity: Teacher Expectations

- Enable learners to analyze and explain the ways groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns; guide learners as they predict how data and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference;
- Have learners interpret patterns of behavior reflecting values and attitudes that contribute or pose obstacles to cross-cultural understanding; guide learners as they construct reasoned judgments about specific cultural responses to persistent human issues.

Warm-Up (Anticipatory Set)

The teacher should display the following poem and allow student groups to read the poem aloud into audio recorders using a specific tone and alternate perspective—not their own. Each group plays their poem aloud as the class reflects on the following questions.

*O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!*

—	From “Let America Be America Again”
	by Langston Hughes

Reflective Questions:

What did you experience while hearing this poem from other voices?

What does Langston Hughes infer about his perspective on America?

What can we infer about the context of this poem as a historical artifact?

How might we better understand life in America during this time of segregation?

- One spokesperson from each group shares with the class what their overall thoughts were as a group.

Activity (Instruction Input)

- Discuss the Lewison, Seely-Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy connecting the importance of multiple perspectives in the discipline of history.
- The teacher will present the following article and pose questions concerning the narrative, language, context, and perspective: “The 10 Important Events in US History” at <http://listverse.com/2011/07/14/top-10-important-events-in-us-history/>
- Organize the class into cooperative groups. Student groups will each research and analyze an event from the top-ten list, then compile and record sources and artifacts that reflect an African American perspective within the same historical time frame and context of the top-ten event. Students may use a variety of media platforms to create an audiovisual presentation of the parallel African American perspective of the selected historical event.
- Co-create a rubric that adheres to a critical multi-perspective historical account of history.
 - Presentations should include multiple sources (i.e., primary, secondary, artifacts, songs, poems)
 - Essential info to include: counter-event, context, language, counter-perspective, major participants
 - Should address each of the four dimensions of critical literacy by responding to at least two questions for each dimension

Lewison, Seely-Flint, and Van Sluys’s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy, with sample activity questions:

(1) **Disrupting the commonplace:** Look at the “everyday” from multiple lenses in which unspoken modes of awareness are reconsidered and disrupted. Who created this list? Why might this be important to them? Who is the audience of the message?

(2) **Interrogating multiple viewpoints:** Question historical perspectives and interrogating the text, popular culture, and media; “stand in the shoes of others” to understand experiences and texts from our own perspectives and the viewpoints

of others, and to consider these perspectives concurrently. What does this writing/text/dialogue mean to me? Is this text presenting a balanced view of the issue? Do I need to consult another source of information? Whose voice is represented here? Whose voice is missing?

(3) **Focusing on sociopolitical issues:** Reposition yourself in these situations, critically analyze the voices of those who are being privileged or silenced through the text. Whose voice is being left out? What African American historical event took place parallel to this event? How does the African American perspective differ from the event on the top ten list? Provide the significance of the event in reference to more than one perspective.

(4) **Taking action and promoting social justice:** Challenge social injustices through critical thinking and dialogue. How might you address this situation in your life/community experience? What recommendations can you suggest to community or organizational leaders?

Assessment: Co-construct or prepare a rubric based on the above criteria to evaluate student presentations and formatively assess student understanding through critical dialogue.

Teacher Resources

- Mitzi Lewison, Amy Seely Flint, and Katie Van Sluys, “Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices,” *Language Arts* 79, no. 5 (2002): 382–92. This focuses on “the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in certain ways and yet at the same time is a resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions” (Davies & Harré, 1990). This repositioning by teachers and students will allow for a more complex and rich interaction with the text, as well as new responses and potential for responses, and meaning will be made, garnered, and applied by the readers (Connell, 1996). Using the tools of critique and analysis discussed, readers need to be taught how to be cognizant of their own thoughts and feelings toward the texts, and reflect on their own responses in relation to a text, which affirms their identity and experiences, as well as broadening their perspectives. In addition, teachers can utilize a range of critical literacy frameworks to select materials, approach, critique, and deconstruct history in a way that breathes life into the very rich and multiple perspectives of African American history.
- National Education Association: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/index.html>
- M. McLaughlin and DeVogd, “Critical Literacy as Comprehension: Expanding Reader Response,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 48, no. 1 (2004): 52–62.
- Questions for Critical Literacy: http://www.eworkshop.on.ca/edu/pdf/Mod21_critical_literacy.pdf