

# An Analysis of Critical Literacy in Featured Manuscripts Appearing in Two Major Literacy Journals (2011-2020)

Excelsior: Leadership in Teaching and Learning  
2021, Vol. 14(1), 36-50  
© The Author 2021  
CC-BY 4.0 International  
Reprints and permissions:  
surface.syr.edu/excelsior  
<https://doi.org/10.14305/jn.19440413.2021.14.1.03>

[nyacte.org](http://nyacte.org)



Kathleen A. Gormley<sup>1</sup>, Peter McDermott<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Literacy journals provide an important resource for teachers' professional development. Although school districts offer in-service education for their faculty and teachers often attend conferences and workshops sponsored by professional teaching organizations, journal reading remains an important source of information for teachers' ongoing learning. In this study we examined what elementary teachers would learn about teaching critical literacy from reading major journals in literacy education. Critical literacy served as our focus because of the increasing importance of readers knowing how to recognize political, social and cultural perspectives embedded in the texts that they read. Content analysis served as our research method in which all volumes of *The Reading Teacher* and *Language Arts* published between 2011 and 2020 were examined. Results yielded 20 manuscripts meeting our criteria, and these clustered into two categories: (1) manuscripts describing effective critical literacy projects in elementary classrooms; (2) manuscripts discussing the use of children's literature for teaching critical literacy. Given recent national events relating to racial and ethnic injustice throughout the country, we recommend that literacy journals place greater emphasis in publishing manuscripts that help teachers include a critical literacy lens into the lessons they teach children.

## Keywords

critical literacy, elementary reading, professional development

Critical literacy is an increasingly important issue in the modern world and K-12 education (Mirra & Garcia, 2020). This is so because today's texts make far greater demands on readers than ever before (Janks, 2014; Luke & Wood, 2009; Vasquez, 2017). The ease in which texts now appear in social

---

<sup>1</sup> Russell Sage College

<sup>2</sup> Pace University

## Corresponding Author:

Kathleen A. Gormley, Russell Sage College, Esteves School of Education, Room 308, 65 1<sup>st</sup> Street, Troy, NY 12180  
Email: [gormlk@sage.edu](mailto:gormlk@sage.edu)



media and online publications requires readers to attend more closely to issues of truthfulness and accuracy than in the past. Although texts have always embodied particular perspectives and assumptions about the world, readers could assume that editors and review boards monitored their publications for accuracy, perspective, and bias. Yet because many of today's online publications and media lack editors and review boards, readers must now do much of this work on their own. Consequently, today's readers must be more astute in distinguishing truthfulness from falsehood, fact from invention, and perspective from propaganda than readers of previous generations ever needed to do. For these reasons critical literacy should become a more robust part of our curricula and classroom pedagogy (Silvers & Shorey, 2020).

There is an additional reason supporting the integration of critical literacy in school curricula. Recently, the country has suffered through a series of civil conflicts, particularly those occurring between the police and citizenry. These conflicts reflect deep ethnic, economic and social divisions within our society and are fueled by misinformation and prejudices about what is read, observed, and heard in everyday life. The conflicts also illustrate the important role education has in contributing to a civil and just society (Ehrensworth et al., 2020). Schools in democratic societies have a special and challenging mission that extends beyond teaching citizens to reproduce information. Democracies require citizens to recognize and value multiple voices and interpretations of events occurring in everyday life (Ayers et al., 2009; Dewey, 1916). Its citizens must learn that diverse voices are to be valued and measured in terms of truthfulness, authenticity as well as in their potential for supporting democratic values and principles. Many educational theorists (e.g., Ayers et al., 2009; Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Janks, 2010; Shor, 1987) argue that critical literacy can contribute to democratic values and help make society more just for all.

Teachers are the most important variable in children's learning (Aliva & Rodesiler, 2018; Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2015; Konstantopoulos, 2017). The knowledge and expertise teachers bring to classrooms have great influence on children's learning to read (Duke et al., 2011; Morrow & Gambrell, 2018; Snow et al., 2005).

Teacher knowledge is typically acquired in three stages: (1) during pre-certification professional education involving study and classroom fieldwork, which often occurs in colleges and university programs; (2) while student-teaching when teacher candidates are mentored by classroom teachers and university supervisors; (3) in post-certification learning that continues throughout their careers by attending conferences and workshops, networking with other teachers, and reading professional publications. This study focused on the latter by examining what teachers might learn about teaching critical literacy from reading professional journals in literacy education. Two assumptions of the study were that professional journals informed teachers' classroom practice, and what they read about critical literacy would influence their teaching of it.

## Theoretical Background

There was an old axiom in literacy education that teaching children to read requires them to learn to successfully read *the lines*, read *between the lines* and read *beyond the lines*. Critical literacy pertains to this third part of the axiom in which readers are taught to consider what is not explicitly stated in text by examining the sociocultural backgrounds of authors, the power relationships between authors and readers, the context of what is written, and the purpose and intended audiences among other considerations (Ehrensworth et al., 2020). Freebody and Luke (2009) viewed reading as consisting of

four components (i.e., code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text critic) of which the fourth pertained to critical literacy. Other theorists have pointed to the importance of a “critical literacy pedagogy,” (Borshine-Black et al., 2014; Psycher, 2020) wherein readers are taught to read “with the text” and “against” it, so that they can deconstruct the socio-political assumptions of authors and the power relationships between authors and readers.

Friere (1970) is widely known for his philosophical analyses pertaining to transmission and transformative models of education, both of which connect with our understanding of critical literacy. According to transmission models of education, students are viewed as empty vessels where the teacher’s role is primarily giving knowledge to pupils. This transmission model is also known as the “banking” concept of education with the purpose of replicating existing social structures and relationships in a society. In contrast, Friere proposed a transformative model that takes the stance that teaching is a political act in which students learn to critically examine political and social forces embodied in the texts that they read (and we would extend to viewing as well). Friere believed that education can liberate students from oppressive social and cultural conditions by teaching them to actively and critically consider the social and political meanings embedded in the texts that they read in school.

Other theorists (e.g., Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Shor, 1987) have similarly argued about the importance of teaching students to become critically aware of the forces influencing what they view and read. For such theorists, education is much more than memorizing and replicating knowledge - it involves careful consideration of existing sanctioned knowledge, as represented in textbooks and school curricula, so that the biases and assumptions embodied therein can be identified and social justice might be obtained. Janks (2010) extended this work to literacy education in which the interrelationships among language, literacy, and power are integrated into teaching such that students develop a better understanding of the social and cultural assumptions in the texts they read in school.

There is a rich literature base that supports teaching critical literacy in the elementary grades. We use the term, critical literacy, to refer to what Soares and Wood (2010) define as the following:

... a pedagogical approach to reading that focuses on the political, sociocultural, historical, and economic forces that shape young students’ lives. It is an approach that teaches readers to become critically conscious of their own values and responsibilities in society (p. 487).

Theorists have argued that critical literacy can be taught in developmentally appropriate ways throughout the elementary grades (Janks, 2010; Luke & Wood, 2009; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 1999; Vasquez, 2017). Critical literacy is not only essential in literacy education (Janks, 2014; Shannon, 1995), it is important in the study of social studies (Ogle et al., 2007), new literacy studies (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Gainer, 2013; Leu, Forzani & Kennedy, 2015), and social justice education (Ayers & Hagood, 2000; Christiansen, 2017; Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2004). Critical literacy is embedded in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association for Best Practices, 2010), and it is evident in New York’s Next Generation Learning Standards (2017). Given the extensive curricula and policy support in the professional literature, it should be clear that the teaching of critical literacy is appropriate and vital for the elementary grades.

### *Purpose of Study*

Professional literacy journals, particularly those intended for practitioner audiences, are an important source of continuing education for classroom teachers. Many teachers have enrolled in professional

organizations that publish journals with manuscripts pertaining to current theories and practices in literacy education, and school buildings often have professional libraries where professional journals are freely available for faculty. Staff developers and literacy coaches often support their workshops and seminars with teachers by sharing professional journal articles about current theories and practices for teaching reading (Affinito, 2018). Suffice it to say, journal reading remains an important source of professional development for today's busy teachers.

Previously, researchers have conducted content analyses of professional literacy publications (Dillon et al., 1992; Mohr et al., 2017; Pearson, 1992), but those analyses did not examine the frequency in which manuscripts addressed critical literacy. Dillon et al. (1992) conducted a content analysis of the first 44 volumes of *The Reading Teacher* but did not report a single manuscript about critical literacy. Pearson (1992) reviewed trends and issues appearing in volumes of *The Reading Teacher* between 1968-1991, but critical literacy was not mentioned as one of them. Recently, Mohr et al. (2017) examined manuscripts published in the *The Reading Teacher* during a 25-year period between (1992-2017), but critical literacy was again not identified as a content topic in their analyses, although it could have been subsumed in their broader category, "Instructional strategies."

We know that times change and topics deemed important during one era might be more or less important in another. Yet an analysis of the topics appearing in current journals provide a sense of what a profession sees as essential for teachers to know about teaching literacy in today's schools. For this study we assumed that manuscripts appearing in professional literacy journals reflected current classroom practices and advanced promising new ones. We further believed that the content of professional journals has the potential to inform and shape teachers' beliefs and instructional practices for teaching literacy (Schraw & Bunning, 1996). For these reasons, we examined refereed journals published by the International Literacy Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, which are the professional specialty associations in literacy education, that are the intended audiences of elementary classroom and specialist teachers. These organizations are widely viewed as the premier sources of professional information regarding theory and practice in literacy education. Specifically, we examined these organizations' premier journals in elementary literacy education to answer the following questions:

1. What do professional journals say about teaching critical literacy in elementary reading programs?
2. What pedagogies do the journals recommend for teaching critical literacy in elementary grades?
3. What trends and patterns for teaching critical literacy in the elementary grades appeared in these journals?

## Method

Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013; Weber, 1990) served as our research method because of its appropriateness for answering our research questions. The International Literacy Association (ILA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) are two widely known professional literacy associations that have produced standards for teachers of reading and English language arts education. Their professional standards are recognized by national accrediting bodies in teacher education, and our institutions have used ILA's and NCTE's teaching standards for their accreditation reviews (e.g., Association for Advancing Quality Educator Preparation, Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation).

Both ILA and NCTE publish journals intended for elementary classroom and specialist teachers. *The Reading Teacher* (ILA) and *Language Arts* (NCTE) are widely recognized and read publications with long publishing histories. At the time of our analysis *The Reading Teacher* had published 74 volumes and *Language Arts* published 98 volumes. September 2011 served as the publication date to begin our review because it represented the first full academic year after the release of the Common Core Standards (2011) in which critical literacy was identified as a curricula standard in elementary literacy education. December 2020 served as the end date for this review because we completed our analysis in January 2021. Beginning with September 2011 and concluding in December 2020, we examined a total of 65 issues of *The Reading Teacher* and 56 issues of *Language Arts*.

Our research protocol consisted of using the online “Professional Development Collection” database for identifying manuscripts appearing in the two journals. We used the words “critical” and “literacy” as the search terms and restricted the search within the publication dates of 2011 to 2020 for each journal. This search parameter allowed us to identify all manuscripts using those two terms within the titles or abstracts. In a few instances this search procedure yielded manuscripts where “critical” and “literacy” appeared in the abstracts or title but did not employ critical literacy as a theoretical framework. Consequently, manuscripts of this kind were not included in our analysis.

We excluded regular columns appearing in the journals from the analysis. Our review was intended to focus on featured articles, which involved blind review of manuscripts by outside readers, whereas column editors composed or invited manuscripts to appear in their columns without using blind review as their selection criteria. For these reasons columns such as “Literature Links,” “Book Choices,” “Literature Reviews,” “From the Editors” appearing in *The Reading Teacher* and columns such as “Perspectives on Practice,” “Language Arts Lessons,” “Research & Policy” and “Children’s Literature Reviews” in *Language Arts* were eliminated from this analysis. There were no instances in which we disagreed when categorizing the manuscripts.

## Results

The purpose of this study was to examine two major journals in literacy education (*The Reading Teacher* and *Language Arts*) to determine the extent that critical literacy was discussed in their featured manuscripts during a near ten-year time period. The journals were examined to learn the frequency in which critical literacy appeared in their featured manuscripts, the methods that were recommended for teaching critical literacy and whether any trends or patterns appeared in the journals that related to critical literacy pedagogy.

We identified 20 manuscripts, which were published between September 2011 to December 2020, that met our selection criteria. The number of featured manuscripts appearing in the two journals about critical literacy was nearly even, with nine manuscripts appearing in *Language Arts* and 11 in *The Reading Teacher*. Nearly twice as many manuscripts appeared in the last five volumes of the journals than in the first five years; that is, eight manuscripts appeared between 2011-2015 period, but 12 manuscripts were published between 2016 thru 2020. Table 1 identifies the manuscripts meeting our selection criteria.

The identified manuscripts clustered into two categories: (1) Those manuscripts presenting descriptions (N=9) of classroom learning projects in which critical literacy served as the theoretical foundation for teaching and learning. (2) Those manuscripts (N = 11) discussing how to select and use children’s literature as a vehicle for teaching critical literacy with children and in two cases with teacher

candidates. Although there was some overlap in the two categories because a classroom project might have also included children's literature in its learning activities, our categories represent the emphasis we perceived in these manuscripts. Table 1 displays the two categories of manuscripts identified in our analysis.

Table 1

*Categories of Manuscripts Appearing in The Reading Teacher or Language Arts with "Critical" and "Literacy" in their Titles or Abstracts (2011-2020)*

Category and Manuscript
<i>Descriptions of Critical Literacy Lessons</i>
Buchholz, B. (2013). Drama as serious (and not so serious) business: Critical play, generative conflicts and moving bodies in a 1:1 classroom. <i>Language Arts</i> , 93(1), 7-24.
Comber, B. (2013). Schools as meeting places: Critical and inclusive literacies in changing local environments. <i>Language Arts</i> , 90(5), 361-371.
Driessens, S., & Parr, M. (2020). Rewriting the wor(l)d: Quick writes as a space for critical literacy. <i>The Reading Teacher</i> , 73(4), 415-426. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1862">https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1862</a>
Gatto, L. (2013). "Lunch is gross": Gaining access to powerful literacies. <i>Language Arts</i> , 90(4), 241-252.
Herr, K., & Naidtch, F. (2011). Trampling over or traveling with? Reconsidering the culture of achievement. <i>Language Arts</i> , 88(5), 356-364.
Lau, S. M. (2012). Reconceptualizing critical literacy teaching in ESL Classrooms. <i>The Reading Teacher</i> , 65(5), 325-329.
McLaughlin, M., & DeVogd, G. (2020). Critical expressionism: Expanding reader response in critical literacy. <i>The Reading Teacher</i> , 73(5), 587-595. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1878">https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1878</a>
Souto-Manning, M., & Martell, J. (2017). Committing to culturally relevant literacy teaching as an everyday practice. <i>Language Arts</i> , 94(4), 252-256.
Wargo, J. (2019). Sounding the garden, voicing a problem: Mobilizing critical literacy through personal digital inquiry with young children. <i>Language Arts</i> , 96(5), 275-285.
<i>Descriptions of how Children's Literature can be Used for Teaching Critical Literacy</i>
Aukerman, M., Grovet, K., & Belfatti, M. (2019). Race, ideology, and cultural representation in Raz-kids. <i>Language Arts</i> , 96(5), 286-300.
Callow, J. (2017). "Nobody spoke like I did": Picture books, critical literacy, and global contexts. <i>The Reading Teacher</i> , 71(2), 231-237. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1626">https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1626</a>
Gritter, K., Van Duinen, D. V., Montgomery, K., Blowers, D., & Bishop, D. (2017). Boy troubles? Male literacy depictions in children's choices picture books. <i>The Reading Teacher</i> , 70(5), 571-581. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1559">https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1559</a>
Jocius, R., & Shealy, S. (2018). Critical book clubs: Reimagining literature reading and response. <i>The Reading Teacher</i> , 71(6), 691-702. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1655">https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1655</a>
Kelly, K., Laminack, L., & Gould, E. (2020). Confronting bias with children's literature: A preservice teacher's journey to developing a critical lens for reading the word and the world. <i>The Reading Teacher</i> , 94(3), 297-304. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1949">https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1949</a>
Labadie, M., Wetzel, M., & Rodgers, R. (2012). Opening spaces for critical literacy: Introducing books to young readers. <i>The Reading Teacher</i> , 66(2), 117-127.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.01097>

- McClung, N. (2017). Learning to queer text: Epiphanies from a family critical literacy practice. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(4), 401-410. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1640>
- Newstreet, C., Sarker, A., & Shearer, R. (2019). Teaching empathy: Exploring multiple perspectives to address Islamophobia through children's literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 72(5), 559-568. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1764>
- Reese, D. (2018). Critical indigenous literacies: Selecting and using children's books about Indigenous peoples. *Language Arts*, 95(6), 389-393.
- Riley, K., & Crawford-Garrett, K. (2016). Critical texts in literacy teacher education: Living inquiries into racial justice and immigration. *Language Arts*, 94(2), 94-107.
- Wood, S., & Jocius, R. (2013). Combating 'I hate this stupid book!': Black males and critical literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 66(8), 661-669.
- 

### *Descriptions of Elementary Lessons using a Critical Literacy Framework*

Nine manuscripts described critical literacy lessons in elementary grades. These nine manuscripts demonstrated that all children have the capacity to think critically about topics and issues in their lives. These manuscripts offered examples of how teachers used critical literacy in elementary reading lessons.

Comber (2013) described how "placed-based" theory can be effectively used for teaching critical literacy. She described two multiage classes engaged in a study of the school experiences of adults and children who had attended an Australian school building that was being replaced by a modern one. The literacy practices used in this project involved children interviewing custodians, cafeteria workers, teachers, and other children about their experiences in the school. Analyses of the interviews resulted in a 50-page book representing the voices of indigenous, white, and new immigrants' experiences in their school building. The children's book helped inform the design of the new school building that would replace the current one.

Gatto (2013) described how a critical literacy project was successfully used in grades 2-4 when the inquiry subject was authentic and pertinent to children's lives. In this case children participated in active inquiry about the kinds of lunches currently being served in their school cafeteria as compared to those served in wealthier school districts. To answer their questions children developed a survey in which they composed question items, administered and interpreted their survey results for others. They shared their survey results with their school administrators with recommendations about how school lunches could be more appealing and nutritious in their building.

Souto-Manning and Martell (2017) described how a second grade teacher taught children to ask critical questions about an event occurring outside their classroom window. The event that interested the children pertained to a news story about several window washers who were stuck on a scaffold on the 69<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center building in NYC. The children questioned why the tabloid news did not mention the window washers' names, identify where the workers lived, or describe the danger of the window washers' work. The children asked whether the story would have been different if the window washers were white rather than people of color. The children learned to express themselves by asking critical questions that were culturally relevant to their own observations of the world.

Lau (2012) described how critical literacy could be effectively taught in the upper elementary grades when the topics of study were pertinent to children's lives. Students in this case were English

Language Learners (ELLs) who were learning to question and examine events they encountered as new immigrants in a Canadian school. Children learned to pose critical questions about school events and examine the characteristics of heroes in their home country with those in their Canadian school.

Driessens and Parr (2020) described how a 6th grade teacher used “quick writes” to engage children in critical literacy discussions about shared texts. The authors concluded that “quick writes” helped activate children’s prior knowledge and stimulated their questioning of classroom texts. Through “quick writes” children learned to examine issues of privilege, power, and equity presented in classroom texts. These “quick writes” supported children’s thinking about issues of social justice and improved the quality of their compositions.

The use of multimodal and digital responses to literature appeared in two manuscripts about teaching critical literacy: (1) Buchholtz (2013) employed drama as an art form to engage children in critical thinking about topics and issues in their own lives. Children used dramatic play to create video commercials on their iPads, and their performances represented their thinking about social and cultural issues embedded in classroom readings. (2) Mclaughlin and DeVog (2020) presented “critical expressionism” as an extension of how children responded to texts with a critical literacy lens. Critical expressionism supplements classroom discussion with the visual and performing arts and digital literacies. The authors explain that children can learn alternate ways of responding to texts by using a critical literacy lens, and, moreover, they can display their thinking to others through dramatizations, podcasts, inquiry-based projects, songs, and the visual arts.

Wargo (2019) described how critical literacy was effectively embedded into a first-grade student’s digital inquiry project. The first grader composed critical questions about the local environment and then used these self-generated questions for developing a plan of action for environmental protection. The project encouraged the first grader to construct inquiry questions, identify resources for answering them, and develop a plan for improving the local bird habitat.

Herr and Naidtch (2011) described a restructured school where seventh grade boys were placed in single-gender classrooms to improve their academic achievement. The authors shared the importance of teaching children to ask critical questions about the school with the goal of building a positive classroom community. The 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys learned how to ask critical questions to build personal respect for one another, and to critique and be questioned by others. The authors argued that these classrooms exemplified the importance of critical questioning for community building with students who previously experience learning difficulties in school.

### *Teaching Critical Literacy through Children’s Literature*

Eleven featured manuscripts examined how critical literacy theory could be taught through children’s literature. These manuscripts discussed the importance of selecting literature containing authentic voices, cultures, and experiences. These manuscripts described a variety of topics and themes relating to children’s lives including the representation of refugee experiences, the quality of indigenous literature, the depiction of family structures, the representation of males, and the use of children’s literature to transform preservice teachers’ perspectives about children from historically underrepresented groups. The topics and themes presented in these manuscripts are described here:

**Authenticity of Representations.** Labadie, Wetzel & Rogers (2012) describe how rich book introductions can be used teach children to recognize the voices that are heard and unheard in the

literature they read. By doing so, children learn to explore social justice issues, question ‘why’ events happened, and discern whether some events are recurring today. Teacher prompts during the book introductions encouraged children as young as second grade to examine texts more thoughtfully and participate more fully in critical conversations about the events portrayed in the literature they read. Recently Aukerman, Grovet and Belfatti (2019) examined the representation of minoritized people in a widely used online reading curriculum. Using critical literacy theory as their framework, the authors examined the authenticity and quality of the reading material in the online program, “Raz-kids.” The researchers found bias, stereotyping, and misrepresentation of groups that have been minoritized and victimized by the dominant culture. The authors recommend that schools and families be cautious when using this widely used reading curriculum, and they recommend that the online program be revised to more accurately represent the experiences and voices of people of color.

**Refugees.** The portrayal of refugee experiences in children’s literature is examined by Callow (2017), who described how Australian children learned to analyze the depiction of the immigration experience. She used literature to help children critically analyze text and illustrations about how new immigrant children must feel to be in a new country and new school. Children then learned to participate in critical conversations about immigration by examining decisions that authors make when presenting immigrant stories. Callow’s manuscript provides an example of how illustrated books can be used to help children develop empathy and a social conscience about refugees and their lived experiences.

**Indigenous Literature.** Reese (2018) explains that too often books used in schools about indigenous people are written by non-native authors, and that these books often contain misrepresentations of indigenous people’s life experiences. Reese argues that it is important to select tribal specific stories because of the great diversity among native nations. Teachers need to select books by native authors so that cultural information and nuances are authentic and true. Reese also explains that reading books about the experiences of indigenous people must occur throughout the year and contain a variety of perspectives, rather than being relegated to a holiday such as Thanksgiving. Indigenous literature provides opportunities for children to develop their critical literacy skills.

**Affirming a Variety of Family Structures.** McClung (2017) argues that traditional notions of family (i.e., cisgendered mother and father cohabitating with child/children) are embedded in stories, and that often such family depictions are problematic for children whose families are differently organized. While McClung addresses the experiences of one four-year old child with a white cisgender ‘mother’ and a transgendered ‘father,’ she contends that dominant and non-dominant families need to be included in shared readings so that children acquire a broader view of family and learn to understand that not all families look or function alike.

**Male Representations.** Two manuscripts examined males and masculinity in children’s literature, with one examining their portrayal in literacy activities within books (Gritter et al., 2017) and the other (Wood & Jocius, 2013) looking specifically at how black males were positioned. Gritter et al. (2017) argued that children’s literature reflects a community’s cultural beliefs, but too often male characters in stories are viewed negatively. They examined male protagonists in popular books (i.e., *ILA’s Children’s Choices* reading list) and found that more than half of the books did not value males’ use of literacy to problem solve. The authors discuss the importance of teachers helping children think deeply to

understand what they read, confront misrepresentations as reflected in their own lived experiences, attend to visual messages in illustrations, and, finally, for children to learn to recognize and resist stereotypes based on gender. Wood and Jocius (2013) argue that the social and cultural needs of black boys are frequently omitted in classroom reading selections. The authors make a case that critical literacy can be developed with a three-prong approach by (1) selecting culturally relevant texts, (2) fostering collaboration, and (3) eliciting critical conversations. Such an approach, they argue, invites young black males to see themselves in texts, affirms the relevance of their life experiences, and encourages them to better connect to schooling through critical literacy practices. Collectively, Gritter et al. (2017) and Wood and Jocius (2013) highlight the importance of examining gender representations for elementary readers.

**Preservice Teacher Preparation.** Wood & Jocius (2017) described how they used a critical literacy framework to help preservice teachers think about teaching and learning in diverse communities where they would student-teach. Specifically, they used children's literature containing non-mainstream perspectives about racial justice and immigration to help their pre-service teachers understand world perspectives that are different from their own. The authors described how multicultural children's literature and classroom discussion strategies helped broaden the perspectives of their white preservice teachers so that the preservice teachers might better engage, understand, and teach children in the diverse schools where they would be placed. Kelly et al. (2020) document the growth of a single student teacher in learning to develop a critical lens when teaching in a second grade multiethnic classroom. Children's literature served as the means for the student teacher's journey, and critical literacy theory served as the framework for the student teacher to learn to question text authority. Kelly et al. provide numerous examples of children's literature and critical questions that can be used to elicit issues about ethnicity, power, and privilege in elementary classrooms. Importantly, the authors document the student teacher's growth in learning to teach literacy with a critical lens in a primary classroom.

Jocius and Shealy (2018) describe a yearlong book club project in a third grade classroom that focused on texts featuring characters with disabilities. The authors encouraged children to respond to texts through drawings, videos, blog posts, posters, and interactive games. Children used multimedia tools to compose personal and critical meanings that extended their book club discussions. Their group responses were shared with the entire class, and in many cases, children revealed their growing abilities to ask critical questions about the portrayal of people with disabilities in literature.

Newstreet et al. (2018) describe the use of text sets to teach children about Islamic people and Muslim contexts. The authors explain the importance of sharing cultural information through literature to improve children's empathy of newcomers. Three text sets containing literature at a variety of reading levels are identified and a variety of teaching strategies, such as photography, character maps, and response journals, are described for improving children's empathy with immigrant children.

### *Summary of Results*

Results of our analyses identified 20 manuscripts meeting our search criteria. These manuscripts clustered into two categories. The first category consisted of manuscripts describing elementary lessons where critical literacy served as the instructional method. Examples of these manuscripts included a description of a place-based inquiry project in which elementary children studied the social history of

their school building (Comber, 2013), children actively examining the quality of school lunches served in their cafeteria compared with those in a wealthier district (Gatto, 2013), and a description of a learning unit in which second grade children learned to ask critical questions concerning the well-being of window washers who were trapped on an outdoor scaffold of One World Trade Center (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2017).

The second category of manuscripts described how children's literature could serve as an excellent resource for planning and implementing critical literacy lessons. These manuscripts clustered into six categories: (1) sharing of teaching strategies for helping children think critically about the books and online reading programs (Labadie et al., 2012; Aukerman et al., 2019); (2) using literature to help children develop empathy and compassion for the experiences of refugees (Callow, 2017); (3) critically considering descriptions of indigenous people in literature (Reese, 2018); (4) examining contemporary family structures with cisgender and transgender parents (McClung, 2017); (5) employing literature to consider descriptions of masculinity (Gritter et al. 2017) and discussing the underrepresentation of African American boys in classroom reading materials (Wood & Jocius, 2013); (6) developing strategies for using children's literature with prospective teachers so that they learn about cultural and ethnic diversity they will experience in their elementary classrooms (Kelly et al., 2020; Riley et al., 2016).

## Discussion

Our professional interests in critical literacy provided the initial rationale for conducting this inquiry about the ILA and NCTE journals. However, events of the 2020 year, in which large numbers of people of all ages and ethnicities demonstrated in their streets for social justice, have energized us and highlighted the importance of critical literacy becoming a greater part of teachers' professional development and classroom teaching. Literacy curricula, in our opinion, is too often defined by political and economic interpretations of education in which test-driven curricula narrows what is taught and one-size-fits-all models of instruction ignore diversity in children's life experiences and ways of learning. Moreover, some elementary reading programs offer restricted views of the world that marginalize and distort the lived experiences of many of the children we teach in this diverse society. Our hope is that the results of this study will contribute to deeper discussions about reforms to literacy curricula and help teachers develop lessons in which issues and concerns about social justice are studied more thoroughly throughout the elementary grades. The use of a critical literacy framework offers much potential for improving elementary literacy education. By more fully integrating critical literacy into elementary reading programs, children can become knowledgeable and engaged citizens, who welcome diverse voices and value social justice.

Teacher educators have a particularly important role in preparing candidates for classroom teaching. Teacher candidates need to learn ways to connect children's life experiences and identities with the texts that are presented in school reading programs. Helping children make such connections is essential so that they see relevancy in what they read. Teachers of critical literacy assume a strength-based perspective on reading comprehension by helping children use their social and cultural identities for unpacking the texts that they read.

Our study relates to other content analyses of professional literacy journals (Dillon et al., 1992; Mohr et al., 2017; Pearson, 1992) in which the journals were examined for topics and trends appearing in them. However, our study differed from the others because we focused only on the featured

manuscripts appearing in *The Reading Teacher* and *Language Arts* that discussed ways teachers could present lessons for teaching critical literacy to elementary children. We were interested in what elementary teachers might learn about teaching critical literacy from reading these journals.

Teachers reading the manuscripts identified in this study will learn about exemplary lessons for teaching critical literacy. These lessons illustrate how elementary children can learn to use their social and cultural knowledge for examining everyday events and activities depicted in their reading texts. Teachers will see examples of how children learn to ask critical questions about the social and cultural identities and roles of people portrayed in the classroom texts. Teachers will discover how children can learn to ask critical questions, such as why some schools have more nutritional lunches than others or how they can participate in service projects for protecting their local environment. Teachers will learn a variety of instructional methods for helping children learn to question normative assumptions and biases that are implicit in the stories they read.

The manuscripts identified in this study provided many examples of how children's literature could serve as a resource for teaching critical literacy. Reading these articles present many possibilities. Teachers can learn how literature can be used for helping children think critically about social and ethnic diversity. They can discover how children learn to question, analyze and make thoughtful decisions about events and activities in the stories that they read. Teachers can develop strategies for helping children learn about the effects of race, class, gender, diverse family structures, language and religion on people's everyday lives.

There were some limitations in our study method. We examined featured manuscripts appearing in *The Reading Teacher* and *Language Arts* because we wanted to focus our analysis on manuscripts that underwent rigorous peer reviews in the two major literacy journals. However, by restricting our analysis to the featured manuscripts, we also excluded regular journal columns and departments that might have examined professional books and practices for teaching critical literacy. When planning this study we decided to examine only these two journals in literacy education. This decision, of course, eliminated scrutiny of other journals where manuscripts about teaching critical literacy in the elementary grades likely appeared.

Despite what we believe to be the excellent quality of manuscripts identified in this study, critical literacy merits even greater prominence in these professional literacy journals. Professional organizations, such as ILA and NCTE, need to exert stronger and persistent leadership in advancing critical literacy in the teaching of elementary reading. Such an effort will help our country become more just and more democratic in both theory and practice as children learn to read critically about what they read.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for this research.

## References

- Affinito, S. (2018). *Literacy coaching: Transforming teaching and learning with digital tools and technology*. Heinemann.
- Isch, A., & Rodesiler, L. (2019). Developing as professionals, learning as preservice teachers. *English Journal*, 108(3), 102-104.
- Alvermann, D. E., & Hagood, M. C. (2000). Critical media literacy: Research, theory and practice in "new times." *Journal of Educational Research*, 93(3), 193-205.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220670009598707>
- Ayers, W., Quinn, T., & Stovall, D. (2009). *Handbook of social justice in education*. Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203887745>
- Bomer, R., & Bomer, K. (2001). *For a better world: Reading and writing for social action*. Heinemann.
- Borshine-Black, C., Macaluso, M., & Petrone, R. (2014). Critical literature pedagogy: Teaching canonical literature for critical literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 58(2), 123-133. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.323>
- Christensen, L. (2017). *Reading, writing, and rising up: Teaching about social justice and the power of the written word*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Rethinking Schools.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2004). Defining the outcomes of teacher education: What's social justice got to do with it? *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 32(3), 193-212.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866042000295370>
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Rothman, R. (2015). *Teaching in a flat world: Learning from high performing systems*. Teachers College Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Macmillan.
- Dillon, D., O'Brien, D., Hopkins, C., Baumann, J., Humphrey, J., Pickle, J., Ridgeway, V., Wyatt, M., Wilkinson, C., Murray, B., & Pauler, S. (1992). Article content and authorship trends in *The Reading Teacher* 1948- 1991. *The Reading Teacher*, 45(5), 362-368.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20200867>
- Duke, N., Pearson, P., Strachan, C., & Billman, A. (2011). Essential elements of fostering and teaching reading comprehension. In S. Samuels and A. Farstrup (Eds.), *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 51-93). International Reading Association.  
<https://doi.org/10.1598/0829.03>
- Ehrenworth, M., Wolfe, P., & Todd, M. (2020). *The civically engaged classroom: Reading, writing and speaking for change*. Heinemann.
- Freebody, P., & Luke, A. (2009). Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural context. *Prospect. Australian Journal of TESOL*, 5(7), 7-16.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.
- Gainer, J. (2013). 21<sup>st</sup> Century mentor texts: Developing critical literacies in the information age. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 57(1), 16-19. <https://doi.org/10.1002/JAAL.210>
- Gainer, J., Valdez-Gainer, N., & Kinard, T. (2009). Elementary bubble project: Exploring critical media literacy in a fourth-grade classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(8), 674-683.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/JAAL.210>
- Giroux, H., & McLaren, P. (1986). Teacher education and the politics of engagement: The case of democratic schooling. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(3), 213-239.  
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.56.3.trr1473235232320>

- Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and power*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203869956>
- Janks, H. (2014). Critical literacy's ongoing importance for education. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult literacy*, 57(5), 349-356. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.260>
- Konstantopoulos, S. (2017). Teacher effects in early grades: Evidence from a randomized study. *Teachers College Record*, 113(7), 1541-1565.
- Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Sage.
- Leu, D., Forzani, E., & Kennedy, C. (2015). Income inequality and the online reading gap: Teaching our way to success with online research and comprehension. *The Reading Teacher*, 68(6), 422-427. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1328>
- Luke, A., & Wood, A. (2009). Critical literacies in school: A primer. *Voices from the Middle*, 17(2), 9-18.
- Mclaughlin, M., & DeVogd, G. (1999). *Critical literacy: Enhancing children's comprehension of text*. Scholastic.
- Mirra, N., & Garcia, A. (2020). "I hesitate but I do have hope": Youth speculative civic literacies for troubled times. *Harvard Education Review*, 90(2), 295-321. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-90.2.295>
- Mohr, K. Ding, G., Strong, A., Branum, L, Watson, N., Preistel, K., Juth, S. Carpenter, N., & Lundstrum, K. (2017). Reading the past to inform the future: 25 years of *The Reading Teacher*. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(3) 251-264. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1636>
- Morrow, L. & Gambrell L. (2018). *Best practices in literacy instruction* (6<sup>th</sup> Edition). Guildford. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers.
- (2010). *Common Core State Standards*. Author.
- New York State Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards (2017). <http://www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/new-york-state-next-generation-english-language-arts-learning-standards>
- Ogle, D., Klemp, R., & McBride, B. (2007). *Building literacy in social studies: Strategies for improving comprehension and critical literacy*. ASCD.
- Pearson, P. (1992). RTremembrance: The second 20 years. *The Reading Teacher*, 45(5), 378-387.
- Psycher, T. (2020). Reading with and against the times of Trump. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies*, 33(2), 202-211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1681549>
- Riley, K., & Crawford, K. (2016). Critical texts in literacy teacher education: Living inquiries into racial justice and immigration. *Language Arts*, 94(2), 94-107.
- Schraw, G., & Bruning, R. (1996). Readers' implicit models of reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 31(3), 290-305. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.31.3.4>
- Shor, I. (1987). *Critical teaching and everyday life*. University of Chicago Press.
- Shannon, P. (1995). *Texts, lies, and videotapes: Stories about life, literacy and learning*. Heinemann.
- Silvers, P., & Shorey, M. C. (2020). *Many texts, many voices: Teaching literacy and social justice to young learners in the digital age*. Stenhouse.
- Snow, C. E., Griffin, P., & Burns, M. S. (Eds.). (2005). *Knowledge to support the teaching of reading: Preparing teachers for a changing world*. Jossey-Bass.
- Soares, L., & Wood, K. (2010). A critical literacy perspective for teaching and learning social studies. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(6), 486-494. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.63.6.5>
- Vasquez, V. (2017). *Critical literacy: Across the K-6 curriculum*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315642277>

Weber, R. P. (1990). *Basic content analysis* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Sage.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412983488>