

Book reviews

CRITICAL LITERACY WITH ADOLESCENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS EXPLORING POLICY AND PRACTICE IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS

Alford, Jennifer H. 2021. Routledge Research in Language Education. London and New York.

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While critical literacy has been studied and applied in first language education for over forty years, its implementation in English language teaching and learning contexts has been both more recent and more challenging (Fajardo, 2015; Haque, 2007). There is misunderstanding about what it is, and its complexity means that many teachers find it challenging to incorporate in their classroom practice. As Luke (2013, cited by Alford, 2021) points out, students of migrant or working-class backgrounds are often not afforded the same access to education as more privileged students, instead seen to be requiring development of basic skills (grammar, vocabulary) rather than exposure to a more ‘intellectually challenging’ curriculum. Yet, as Freire & Macedo (1987, cited by Alford, 2021) point out, it is vital that students of migrant backgrounds develop the ability to “read the word and the world critically” (Alford, 2021), this being crucial to their understanding of the differing cultural discourses that they will encounter as additional language speakers, whether within the school system, the wider mainstream community in which they live, or within a rapidly increasing globalised society. This position on critical literacy underpins Jennifer Alford’s book, *Critical Literacy with Adolescent English Language Learners – Exploring Policy and Practice in Global Contexts* (2021).

The book’s first chapter deals with the definition of critical literacy and its importance for adolescent learners of English within the context of educational policy. Alford is particularly interested in the educational practitioner understanding of critical literacy, beginning her exploration of the concept with individual teacher

definitions drawn from her research. She then explores the origins and complexity of the concept, grounded in critical social theory (The Frankfurt School) (Corradetti, 2017) and influenced by various ideological social, political and educational approaches, such as Freire and Macedo's *critical pedagogy* (1987) or the work of theorists such as Giroux (1992) and Shor (1980) who consider education as a way to maintain entrenched power and privilege structures. However, of major importance in this chapter is Alford's explanation of why critical literacy is crucial for EAL learners, highlighting that, rather than taking away from language learning in the classroom, it has benefits, both educational and social. Development of critical literacy skills is a social and educational equaliser, providing all students access to social and educational capital – thus justifying why English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) teachers need to read the book with a view to ensuring implementation of critical literacy strategies.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on international perspectives. In chapter 2 Alford explores how critical literacy is conceptualised within a range of global educational policies and curricula: the USA (specifically California), the UK, Canada, Sweden and Australia. She uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore policies from these five global contexts; this technique allows the researcher to investigate the ideological underpinnings of policy and curricula. Chapter 3 moves from policy to an international literature review of the implementation of critical literacy, with a particular view to the EAL/D classroom. Alford also discusses six different models of critical literacy: Freebody and Luke's *Four Resources Model* (1990; 1999); Lewison, Flint and van Sluys' *Four Dimensions of Critical Social Practice* (2002); Janks' *Synthesis Model of Critical Literacy* (2010); Lau's *Integrated Critical Literacy Instructional Model* (2013); Lewison, Leland and Harste's *An Instructional Model of Critical Literacy* (2014) and Anwaruddin's *A conceptual framework for Critical Affective Literacy* (2015). These models provide a basis for both teachers and researchers to consider the role and implementation of critical literacy within a variety of classroom settings.

Having provided readers with a thorough theoretical overview of critical literacy, Alford transports the reader into classrooms to explore how teachers enact critical literacy with secondary EAL/D students through teaching practice within the constraints of curriculum policy. The four case studies, analysed through the CDA

methodology, demonstrate how four Queensland EAL/D teachers (Celia, Margot, Lucas and Riva) recontextualise their constructions of critical literacy. Despite each teacher working from the same curriculum documents, different aspects of critical literacy enactment were observed across two secondary school contexts – these are summarised on page 119 (Alford, 2021). Alford’s analysis was based on Janks’ 2010 *Synthesis Model of Critical Literacy*. Janks proposes four manifestations of critical literacy: Domination, Access, Diversity and Design. **Domination** focusses on the constructedness of texts and an awareness of why the text creator has made particular choices to include or not include. This may manifest in the classroom as text deconstruction with consideration of social power relationships embodied by the texts. **Access** relates to language use, and certainly within Australia, is embodied in *genre pedagogy* and its focus on dominant social forms of language which allow students participation in curriculum, and more broadly, society (Cope and Kalantzis, 2013). **Diversity** focusses on the significance of diverse home literacy practices in schooling while **design** relates to human creativity, in particular, the student’s ability to create new meaning. Alford’s classroom analysis showed a prevalence of Access and Domination orientations, with evidence also of Diversity while Design (where students re-create) being absent (although understandable, given curriculum constraints). Despite these limitations, the case studies provide a springboard for other teachers to consider the “conditions of possibility” (Alford, 2021: 166-7) to enact critical literacy within their own contexts. These possibilities, as well as a synthesis of the results of the case study, form the basis of Chapter 5 which concludes with a future research agenda.

Educators, writers of policy, those engaged in research with English language learners and teachers of students for whom English is an additional language will find this book thoroughly relevant and practical. It defines what critical literacy is and how it is constructed and enacted in both education policy and classroom practice. It presents an overview of global perspectives in an appealing and interesting format. At its core, *Critical Literacy with Adolescent English Language Learners: Exploring Policy and practice in Global Contexts* is a timely reminder of the importance, necessity, and continuation of critical literacy teaching practice. The book does three things very well. It acknowledges the work of teachers globally in advancing the cause of critical literacy in English language learning classrooms. It

also explores how critical literacy is fundamental in English language teaching policy, and it provides extensive details of the author's research and analysis of empirical data gained from her study of four teachers' praxis in Australian high schools. This book is an essential resource for EAL/D teachers, particularly those working with EAL/D students within the school context. It reminds us that teaching English language is more than simply teaching grammar and vocabulary, but teaching students how to 'understand' the world in which they live.

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