Student Views of Learning: Perspectives from Three Countries

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Abstract

This study examines how learners understand themselves as literacy learners and critical thinkers in their classrooms. Students in grades four, five and eight in the United States, Canada, and Kazakhstan were interviewed about their own literacy and thinking practices, their classroom experiences, and their understandings of the role of literacy in a democracy. Implications for classroom practice are described.

Introduction

> **Joe:** *I think talking's probably the best way that helps the students learn. Because, you know, I think it's easier for us if we hear it, 'cause if we read it or write it, we might just think of it as another day of school work, but if we actually talk about it, then we're gonna be listening again. You'd probably get more interested in it*
>
> **Kathryn:** *That's kind of how you learn. You listen and then you get ideas, and that's how you learn about stuff. By thinking and listening.*

Joe's and Kathryn's comments about how their teachers can help them be better learners and critical thinkers are illustrative of how children interpret the classroom instruction that they receive in the elementary and middle grades. These interpretations are filtered through their sense of being literate (Heath, 1991; Young & Beach, 1997). This sense of being literate includes their personal theory of what literacy is, how one becomes literate, how one demonstrates competence, and what counts as literacy in a particular social setting. It also includes one's literate identity, how one views oneself as a literate individual and one's own sense of competency as a literate individual. Learners develop their own sense of being literate through their participation in communities of practice (Gee, 1996; Wenger, 1998). They use this sense of being literate as a tool to negotiate their literate activity in and out of classroom settings and to interpret their own literacy learning (Young, 1996). In addition, this sense of being literate is constantly changing as a result of their work as literacy learners in particular classrooms. One important aspect of this sense of being literate is an identity as a critical thinker and reader who analyzes both written and oral text.

Developing learners who are critical thinkers can sustain democratic societies. Defining what a democratic society is, however, is problematic. It is not simply a society where people have freedom of choice and the right to make their voice heard. Dewey (1927) defines democracy as a social idea, a mode of association where all perspectives are given an audience, difference is embraced, decisions are made, responsibility is taken on, and problems are solved in ways that have their roots in a group's history. In other words, democracy is a way of thinking and acting as part of a community (Lappe, 1999). What constitutes an effective community, and therefore, what constitutes an effective democracy is culturally determined and variable. In order to build a culturally relevant community, then, participants must build habits, abilities, and understandings of participation, including listening to multiple perspectives, respect for others, development of social agendas, and fluency in communication and democratic processes (Gutmann, 1999). Supporting critical thinking and literacy in classrooms encourages these habits by providing an environment where multiple perspectives are encouraged and respected. When learners are encouraged to challenge and interrogate authors, they are given the opportunity to begin to design social futures (New London Group, 1996), to begin to think about shaping their own worlds. By supporting a critical discourse, teachers "set up possible future identities......and possible future worlds for [learners] to inhabit" (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 24).

Critical Literacy and Classroom Practices

Critical literacy has been defined and enacted in many ways. McCaffery (2000) argues that a text, oral or written, is created to present the perspectives and aims of those social, cultural, political, and economic groups who hold power. Supporting critical literacy, then, would mean analyzing the content and experiences portrayed in a text in relationship to one's own experiences, asking whose interests the text and the author are attempting to foreground, whose are absent, and considering how readers are being positioned to listen to particular voices (Luke, 1992, 2000). Morgan (1998) asserts that critical literacy includes problematizing knowledge in texts, empowering readers to consider why an author made particular choices in the writing of the text, and how those authorial choices aid in constructing who the reader is and becomes from the reading. Critical literacy is involved when texts are approached with critical analyses of their content, structure, function, and purpose (Green, 2001). It means becoming a text critic who questions the text, a key set of social practices around written language that occurs as a person interacts with any kind of text (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999) and that a person develops as she becomes literate.

Critical literacy is not synonymous with critical thinking, although critical thinking is clearly part of critical literacy. Critical thinking can be described as independent thinking that uses information as the starting point (Klooster, 2001). It often begins with questions, builds on reasoned arguments and can involve social thinking. While this view of critical thinking is participatory and metacognitive, it remains personal inquiry and does not necessarily require the reader to question the purposes of the text. To be critically literate, one must move beyond individual response and personal discovery to interrogate the curriculum and the everyday world (Cardiero-Kaplan, 2002). Harste (2001) asserts that readers must question, redesign, and create alternate worlds. They should disrupt the commonplace, interrogate multiple viewpoints, focus on sociopolitical issues, and take action to promote social justice (Lewison, Seely Flint, Van Sluys, 2002).

Classrooms and teachers that support the development of a critical stance (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) have several defining characteristics. Support for the discovery and examination of multiple perspectives is key (Beck, 2005; Ciardiello, 2004; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). This examination can only occur in a community where the learners feel free to take risks and where teachers encourage all learners to find their own voice. This voice is found when learners have the opportunity for reflection as well as action — where each learner is positioned as an authority and agent of social change (Beck, 2005; Luna, 2003). While methods to achieve this classroom community are varied, they include immersion by learners in authentic life practices; overt instruction by the teacher to focus learners on the language and actions of practice; critique of the activity and ideas within social, cultural, and political relations inherent in the activity or ideas; and the design by learners of new practices based on their own goals and built on their new learning (New London Group, 1996). As they participate in these communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), learners begin to build their own identity as literate, democratic citizens, transform their own culture and community, and shape open institutions (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

The purpose of our study was to discover how learners interpreted and understood themselves as readers and thinkers in their classrooms. Specifically, we wanted to understand how they interpreted the practices of their teachers and how those practices helped them, the learners, become thinkers. In addition, we wanted to explore how learners understood how skills related to critical reading might help sustain democracy or good citizenship. We felt that it was important to solicit children's views in order to truly understand both the intended and unintended outcomes that affect children's sense of being literate through their classroom participation.

Methodology

The children in this study were students in elementary and middle schools in the United States, Canada, and Kazakhstan. The first two authors had met the third author when we were in Kazakhstan as part of the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking project (RWCT), a professional development program sponsored by the International Reading Association and the Open Society Institute. This program influenced our research study in both perspective and content. The intent of RWCT was to encourage teachers in former Soviet bloc countries to create classroom environments where students would be more active thinkers and learners, developing habits of mind which are appropriate to open societies. The three authors of this study engaged in many conversations about literacy and learning, and frequently had intense discussions about the role of schools in supporting democratic institutions.

As North American educators, we had been challenged by our colleague in Kazakhstan to examine the practices of teachers in our own countries. Since the United States and Canada are long established democracies and Kazakhstan is an emerging democracy, we wondered if there were differences in the way the teachers might talk about learning, their classrooms, and democracy. Our interest in looking at student perspectives came as a result of studying teachers' understandings of critical literacy and of the classroom practices that sustain being critical (see Ward, Beach, and Mirseitova, 2004 for details of this study). The teachers that we interviewed for that study described their classroom practices as fostering connections between texts and life and encouraging learners to question and evaluate what they read. We were interested in finding out if the learners perceived the classroom practices as the teachers had intended.

The methodology for this study was grounded in our view of participatory action research, with a goal of helping teachers to understand how students interpreted classroom practices. As such, we wanted to be sure that our results would be practical to the teachers themselves. In addition, one of the research sites was a country that was not used to the educational research we, as North American researchers, take for granted. Given that we were both introducing qualitative research into schools in Kazakhstan and working with a colleague who had studied this type of research in North America but had not implemented any in her own country, we decided to use an approach that would be amenable to fluctuations in expertise, context, and ethics requirements.

The children (an equal number of boys and girls) were in grades four (4 Canadian children), five (2 American and 4 Kazakhstani children) and eight (2 American and 4 Kazakhstani children), and were students of the teachers we had previously interviewed. The teachers in the previous study had been selected either because we as researchers already knew them as teachers who were implementing teaching strategies to support critical thinking in their classrooms or they were recommended by one of those teachers.

The teachers selected the children who could express themselves well. While we understood that this choice might be a limitation, we felt it important to interview children for whom oral expression would not be a problem. The North American students, both those in Canada and the United States, attended rural schools not far from small university cities, and those in Kazakhstan attended schools in different parts of the country.

To tap into the children's perspectives of their learning and their classrooms, the children were interviewed using a common set of questions. The first set of questions was designed to find out about their experiences as readers and learning to read. The second set of questions asked them to describe their experiences in their classrooms related to critical thinking, including what their teachers were doing to support higher levels of thinking. Finally, the children were asked to talk about their understanding of democracy and good citizenship (see Appendix A for the questions).

Each of us interviewed the children in our respective countries in a conversational way in their schools. We began with the common set of questions, but followed up with questions that responded to the individual child's responses. The interviews took place at the school in a private room near the children's classrooms and were audiotaped. The children each chose their own pseudonym. The taped interviews were transcribed by each of us and the Kazakhstani interviews were translated into English by the third author. Using the categories of Self as Reader, Self as Thinker, Classroom Experiences, and Democracy and Citizenship, we looked for themes across the age levels and countries to describe these particular children's perspectives.

What the Children Told Us

All of the children could talk about themselves as literate people and even, to some extent, describe their early literacy learning. The younger children had difficulty thinking beyond their immediate classroom in describing their classroom experiences while the middle school children could give clear examples of classroom experiences.

Self as Reader

The children ranged on a continuum from avid readers to "not being into reading" (Terry, CA, 4).[1] Most read for pleasure at least some of the time. A variety of aspects made a book a good one to read for the North American children. The fourth graders described good books as ones that "get you thinking...and it's so exciting that you just want to read more and more and more and you can't get to sleep" (Diane, CA, 4), ones that either take you away from reality or are full of factual information that you want to know about, or ones that are fun to read. The fifth graders thought that good books were ones that had scary stories or were mysteries, or were funny or easy to read. The eighth graders described good books as books where the reader had to figure out a mystery, books that were about children's life at school or really well written books where the reader could actually imagine what was happening.

The children had trouble describing exactly how they learned to read, but could identify learning to read as either hard or easy. Most North American children talked about reading little books or learning easy books. Some of them could describe what made learning to read easy or hard in terms of the ways their teachers taught them. James (US, 5) describes his learning to read as "My teacher said that we would already know our alphabet and we would just know what the, each letter sounded like, and we would sound out each letter.....[it was] kinda hard." Jordan (US, 8), who found learning to read easy, recalled "sitting down with my teacher and having them just listen to me read. They didn't to teach me a whole lot but I just remember having to sound out lots of words." One of the Kazakhstani children went beyond just describing how she learned to read. She critiqued what went on and how it affected her viewpoint on reading. She said, "I remember that we were taught too long how to read syllables. I already read well when I came to school but anyway we were taught too long how to pronounce letters and how to write them. It was a drag on my learning."

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[1] The names are pseudonyms. The number is the grade level of the child. The initials represent the country in which the child lived (CA=Canada, US=United States, KZ-Kazakhstan).

Self as Thinker

The children in all three countries could define what they thought a good thinker was, whether they themselves were good thinkers, and if they could think critically. The explicitness of defining thinking as critical thinking seemed to be related not to the age of the children but to the types of classroom activities that they had experienced. The Canadian children connected their thinking to literature circles and the roles they took as part of those discussions. The Kazakhstani children related their thinking ability to the methods that their teachers had used in their classrooms to support opinion formation and multiple viewpoints. The American children could not explicitly link their thinking ability to any particular activities.

The children defined good thinkers differently, often including definitions of critical thinking either implicitly or explicitly. Good thinkers could be "people that think to help people" (Terry, CA, 4) or problem solvers. Good thinkers evaluated characters, determining what was good and bad, and tried to support their own point of view. Good thinkers made connections, tried hard even when topics had unfamiliar vocabulary, and expressed their opinions. Most of the children felt as if they were critical thinkers some, but not all, of the time. This view of themselves, especially for the Canadian and Kazakstani children, seemed tied to the classroom activities provided by their teacher. Terry (CA, 4), for example, felt that being a good thinker depended on the role he took on in his Literature Circle. Kathryn (CA, 4) was even more explicit, saying she was a good thinker because she could take on all of the roles in a Literature Circle, but mostly because she could take on the role of connector and make connections between the book being read and her life or other books. Miras (KZ, 5) felt that he had been a thinker at one point, but was no longer. He stated, "I was taught critical thinking methods in elementary classes [Grades 1-4], but not now. I forgot everything. If I were taught this method at higher grades....," intimating that continued practice in classrooms is important for maintaining thinking abilities. Jordan (US, 8) thought of herself as a critical thinker unless something was too hard or if the teacher did not listen and encourage ideas in the classroom. Joe (US, 8), on the other hand, only felt that he was a good thinker if he was interested in the topic.

Classroom Experiences

All the children could discuss the activities that were occurring in their classrooms, or had occurred in the past. They could critique the support or lack of support for their thinking, although the sophistication of that critique depended on the age of the child.

The Canadian children were used to group work in their grade four classroom, specifically in the use of the Literature Circles for book discussions and in their research reports. They could talk about each of the roles they could take on as part of the group and how that supported taking on multiple perspectives or thinking beyond the book they were reading. Each had a different favorite role for a different reason. These children enjoyed authentic interactions around books when their teacher had not read the book as they felt they could have a real conversation about the book. However, they appreciated their teacher's role as expert when they needed help in finding appropriate Internet sites for their research. They could not, however, say what criteria their teacher used to decide whether information on the Internet was good or not.

The grade five students in the United States were less excited about their school experiences. These grade five students saw group work as opportunities to help each other with assignments or with their reading. They didn’t feel as if they were explicitly asked to expand on their own ideas or make connections between topics, except in very superficial ways. Both of these children wished that there was more time for reflection on their learning to “give us more time to think about things” (James, US, 5). The grade eight students, on the other hand, were more able to critique what specifically about their experiences supported their learning. They felt that some of their teachers did encourage the exchange of ideas and the expression of opinions. They particularly commented on their Leadership class, an optional class that these children had to apply to participate in. In this class, they worked in groups to complete more real-life activities, which to both of the children meant exchanging ideas and listening to the views of others. Both Joe (US, 8) and Jordan (US, 8) felt as if they could tell if the teachers in their classes really wanted to hear their opinions. Jordan stated, “Sometimes they just kind of listen and don’t really think about it.....Whenever they sit there and they actually have a conversation with you [you know they are listening and thinking about it], but if they’re gonna sit there and just look at you and nod their heads, half the time you don’t think they are listening.” Both thought that the few if any connections made across subject areas were superficial, and both felt the need for more time to talk about their learning.

The Kazakhstani children liked working in groups because they could learn from each other. They described their classrooms as places where “we worked in groups, gave associations to words, compared heroes, wrote essays. Everyone could express their own thoughts....it was interesting” (Olga, KZ, 5). They felt it was important to learn from each other, to listen to each other when there were disagreements, and to work together. These students felt as if their teachers listened to them and they knew this because they asked the question, "Why?". Aigerim (KZ, 5) stated “ People who ask ‘Why do you think so?’ are interested.” The older children liked the focus on opinions and listening to each other. Oksana (KZ, 8) exemplifies this view, saying “we worked in groups, expressed our opinions, listened to the opinions of others. The teacher listened and asked for our opinions. It is easier to understand and help each other.” These children also wanted more time to reflect and talk about what they had learned. Aigerim put it succinctly, “I think this way, but what does my friend next to me think about it?”

Democracy and Citizenship

All the children in all three countries had a great deal of difficulty discussing democracy, although all had heard the term. Half the Canadian children had heard the term but were not sure what it meant. Only Kathryn (CA, 4) ventured to say that she knew that “there’s more than one way to think, and there’s more than one thing that you can do, and there’s more than one answer that you can get.” The Kazakhstani children were even more uncomfortable talking about the notion of democracy. One student asked immediately, “Politics?”, sounding like he was asking the interviewer why he should talk about politics since he was in school. Two others said that they did not know what democracy was. They seemed to think that while it was okay to talk about their school experiences, it was not their business to talk about democracy. They did not seem to connect democracy or democratic practices with what was going on around them in their classes.

The American children also knew little about democracy, although the two grade eight students knew a bit more than those in grade five. All the children, however, could describe a good citizen. Those in grade five defined a good citizen as one who helps others. They felt that literacy and thinking skills were important to being a good citizen but for different reasons. Those reasons included the need to understand different ideas, "learn about the right and wrong choices" (James, US, 5), and think about what was read and evaluate ideas so "you do only good things" (Molly, US, 5). The grade eight students, on the other hand, felt that good citizenship went beyond just helping others, although that was an underlying theme. They both emphasized going beyond just voting by participation in civic life and working for change. Both these children felt it important to listen to multiple viewpoints and evaluate ideas. Jordan (US, 8) focused on the need to evaluate ideas to find ones that you could stand behind and support, while Joe (US, 8) felt that it was important to be open to changing your own viewpoint.

Implications for Teachers

We found several lessons for teachers and teaching from our interviews with these children. We do not take these lessons lightly ourselves, both as former classroom teachers and as teacher educators. We have begun to apply our findings to our own teaching practice, and we have begun to help our future teachers think about ways to support children’s development of a sense of being literate that has at its heart critiquing texts and practices.

Educational experiences are interpreted by children in ways that are not necessarily what the teacher intended. Students at all levels are good observers of teachers’ practices, both overt and covert. They can describe what teachers do to support or not support their thinking and can analyze what works well. In addition, they make hypotheses about what they should be learning and how. They continually revise their own theory of what it means to be literate and who they are as literacy learners through this participation. However, in thinking about how others teach, they have not learned how to apply the thinking skills they have learned in one setting to another.

As teachers, then, we should think carefully about not just our overt practices but also about those aspects of our practice of which we might not be conscious. If we are setting up literacy activities that require children to work in groups, are we providing the type of activity for those groups that is authentic, or just giving students a chance to talk to each other legitimately while they complete activities that could best be done on their own? What is our body language saying to the learners in our classrooms? What do the types of questions that we ask indicate?

To decide if group work is appropriate for a task, teachers need to consider the demands of the task on the learner. To support critical thinking, the task should have high cognitive demands, demanding that learners think beyond surface level understanding of a text to critique ideas. The purpose of the task should ensure that sharing ideas in a group enables each student to learn more deeply. The questions provided for discussion or to guide task completion need to be open-ended and demand multiple responses and ways of looking at ideas. These open-ended questions should be authentic, questions to which we as teachers genuinely do not know the answer. For example, after reading a piece of historical fiction, the teacher might ask groups to discuss the following questions: Why do you think the author wrote this story? Which character do you think is most heroic? Why? What did s/he do in the novel that makes you think this?

It is also important that as teachers we explicitly teach children how groups work and provide some sort of structure to the groups. Younger children especially need to learn how to be in a group. Mini-lessons on different group processes, such as taking turns, listening to others, or coming to a consensus make explicit how group members learn from each other and work collaboratively. Fishbowl activities allow children to observe and reflect on both good and not so good group processes. Providing structure to a group, perhaps in the definition of roles or by breaking down the task to its constituent steps helps children see how each person can contribute to the collaboration.

The more explicit teachers are about what they are doing, the more students appropriate the thinking strategy. Without explicitness, students make their own conclusions about the teacher's purposes in a particular lesson or activity. The teachers of the Canadian and Kazakhstani children explicitly labeled the types of thinking that they wanted the children to use. For the Canadian classroom, this labeling was the use of roles that children were to take on in their discussion groups. The children talked about this type of thinking when they described themselves. The Kazakhstani teachers labeled different teaching strategies that they used and the children named these strategies as they described their critical thinking abilities.

It is important, then, that we give what we are doing in our classrooms a name that children can use to discuss what they are doing as learners. This naming provides children with declarative knowledge of thinking processes and procedures, essentially providing them with a tool in their cognitive toolbox. By knowing the name of the thinking process, children can reach into their toolbox of thinking strategies and choose an appropriate thinking tool to use for a similar task.

Declarative knowledge of a thinking strategy is not enough. Children also need to know why the strategy is useful, how they would use it, and when they should reach into their toolbox for it. This type of knowledge can be developed by explicitly telling children why we as teachers have chosen the activities we ask them to do—what we hope for them to learn and why this type of thinking might be useful to them in other activities or in their life. We must also children develop metacognitively so that they will reflect on their own learning and thinking. One way to accomplish this metacognitive thinking is to debrief children's thinking and learning when they complete an activity. Two types of debriefing are important. Children need to reflect on *what* they learned as they participated in the activity and they need to reflect on *how* they learned it. Reflecting on *what* was learned can be accomplished through a variety of activities such as writing in a Learning Log or completing a KWL chart (Ogle, 1986). Reflecting on *how* learning occurred begins with teacher questioning about what children were thinking, why they made particular choices, and how they responded to ideas. With this type of questioning over time, children internalize metacognitive thinking.

With a lack of connection between life and school, democracy and democratic practices are seen as outside the school instead of an integral part of classroom life. The classroom should be a microcosm of democratic practices that encourage an understanding of the ethic of democracy (Masny, 2005). The ethic of democracy promotes power-sharing and active involvement and is exemplified by certain behaviors. These behaviors include active participation, questioning, information gathering, problem solving, respecting and tolerating diversity, assuming responsibility for one's actions, and making choices and decisions. Democratic teaching practices, then, support participatory learning, learning activities where students have the opportunity to make decisions about what and how they will learn. Democratic teaching practices support mutual respect within a community of learners, where both teacher and children are considered learners and engage in dialogue and inquiry about questions of interest. Democratic teaching practices support the development of independent learning and connect classroom learning with the world outside the classroom. In this classroom, the teacher is still the authority figure who teaches the children how to engage in these behaviors. This teaching could be as simple as providing children choice, for example, in the topic they will research as part of a social studies or science unit or the novel they will read as part of an author study. This also means explicitly teaching children the comprehension and learning strategies that they need, including how to evaluate materials for bias, point of view, and adequacy of supporting evidence.

It is important to help children see how what they are learning inside their classroom connects to the life of the community. One way to accomplish this connection is to bring the community into the classroom. An obvious avenue for this connection is to ask community members with expertise in specific topics to come and share their work. However, bringing the community into the classroom may not be sufficient. Children need to become involved outside of the classroom. Service learning projects provide an excellent opportunity for this type of involvement.

The children in our study provided us with important information about how children interpret what teachers are trying to accomplish. Understanding how children make sense of what we say and do provides a window into the intentional and unintentional impact we have on their sense of being literate. Jordan (US, 8) provides sage advice for teachers who want to support critical thinking and democratic practices in their classrooms. She suggests that "[teachers should] just sit there and listen to their [students] opinions, don't just take your own opinion. Maybe every once in a while have a class discussion.....and everybody give their own viewpoint,. [Teachers should] not just listen and say, 'Oh, my idea is the best way.'" Listening to the children we teach is one way for us as teachers to be critical thinkers and democratic practitioners.

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Appendix A: Student Interview Questions on Critical Literacy and Critical Thinking

Students' Backgrounds

I'm interested in finding out about your experiences in school and as a reader.

- What have you enjoyed/or not enjoyed about your schooling?
- Do you remember when you learned to read? Was it easy for you?
- How did your family support you in learning to read?
- Tell me what you remember about your early instruction in reading.
- Did you read for pleasure (i.e., beyond what was required for school) when you were younger?
- Do you think of yourself as an avid reader? What kinds of things do you read now?
- Do you view yourself as a critical thinker?

Experiences with Critical Literacy

I'd like to ask next about different ways in which you have been challenged to think and ask questions about your reading and about the world.

- Does your family discuss news events, world issues? How/where does this happen? (e.g., at mealtimes, when reading newspapers or watching TV….)
- Thinking back over your educational experiences, can you remember activities where you were encouraged to work with other students? Please tell me about these activities in detail, if you can.
- How did teachers encourage you to express your opinion? How did you learn to support your opinion with evidence? Do you think teachers were interested in what you had to say? How do you know? Were a variety of opinions encouraged?
- In your current classes, what examples can you give of being asked to think beyond the text, or to challenge its ideas? Tell me about this.
- Do your teachers help you make connections across subject areas? How do they do this?
- Is there time for reflection in your classes? Tell me about it. Do you wish there was more time for reflection? Why/why not?
- Do you have the opportunity to use different resources to find the answers to questions? Describe the resources and how you use them.
- Have your teachers taught you how to evaluate different resources (i.e., books, the internet, TV, movies)? How did they do that?
- What has been most helpful to you in learning how to be a critical thinker?

Questions about democracy and citizenship

- Tell me what you know about democracy.
- Could you describe a “good citizen”?
- How important do you think being able to read carefully and evaluate what you read is to being a good citizen?

I’m going to list some critical literacy skills. Tell me how you think they are important in sustaining democracy:

- expressing opinions
- making choices
- using multiple sources of information
- thinking beyond what you read
- evaluating ideas
- finding evidence
- taking other people’s viewpoints

Biographies

Sara Ann Beach is a Professor of Literacy Education at the University of Oklahoma. She has a longstanding interest in critical literacy and the role teachers play in developing literate identities. Recent work includes working with teachers of young at-risk children to develop language and literacy rich classrooms. She can be contacted at sbeach@ou.edu.

Angela Ward is a Professor at the University of Saskatchewan. Her recent work includes explorations of literate identity across the lifespan. She also has a longstanding interest in urban Aboriginal education. She can be contacted at angela.ward@usask.ca. Beach and Ward’s next project together is a biographical account of the literate lives of five influential women educators.

Sapargul Mirseitova is president of the Kazakhstan Reading Association. She has longstanding interest in teaching and learning English and educational reform. Sapargul can be reach at smirseit@cde.kz.