Teacher training, equality, access and critical literacy in COVID-19 times

Formação de professores, igualdade, acesso e letramento crítico em tempos de COVID-19

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Interviewed

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at Texas Tech University, Dr. Lesley has worked as a classroom teacher and served as the Director for Developmental Reading at Eastern New Mexico University. Her focus on research and work has been on the promotion of agentive literacy identities and academic literacy skills for marginalized adolescent and adult learners. She has an extensive production of books and papers related to this topic. Nowadays she is also interested in the ways digital media shape enactments of identity for adolescents. So, as a literacy researcher and practitioner she has a long experience in teaching and in working with pre-service teacher and teacher in action as well. She has expertise in adolescent literacy, content area literacy, writing pedagogy, developmental literacy, and critical literacy.

Interviewers

Dorotea Frank Kersch (DFK) is a professor at the Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Unisinos) in the Applied Linguistics Graduate Program. Her research interests include (multi)literacies, critical (media) literacies, teacher training and identities. In collaboration with Mellinee Lesley Dorotea has developed a framework to critical media literacy pedagogy. She coordinates the research group FORMLI – Formação de professores, letramentos e identidades (Teacher training, literacies and identities).

Gabriela Krause dos Santos (GKS) is a master's student in Applied Linguistics from Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Unisinos), her research focus on the use of Digital Storytelling as a way not only to develop Digital Literacy but also to give students/pre-service teachers/teachers in action voice to tell their stories. She is a member of the research group FORMLI and teaches English as a second language in private courses.

Karin Paola Meyrer (KPM) is a master's student in Applied Linguistics from Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Brazil), her research interests include critical literacy in L2 and digital literacies, she is a member of the research group FORMLI, she also holds a specialist degree on Bilingualism and Cognition from Faculdade IENH (Brazil). Karin works with middle school and high school students at a bilingual (Portuguese/English) private school in Brazil.

DFK; GKS and KPM: As we know the 21st century has been the information century. Information is easily accessed from any type of technological devices, which has brought many advantages to society. People who would not have access to information now do. However, we may find many disadvantages as well, once that equity in the access to information is not yet a reality in our countries. Considering this scenario, how do you think it will impact in the education of pre-service teachers and teachers in action development?

ML: What I see happening in teacher education programs and in schools with practicing teachers is technology is often treated as an "add on" to the regular curriculum. New technologies are considered an enhancement more than part of the core learning. This mindset leads to complacency regarding issues of access for all students, and it tends to devalue the complexities of literacy knowledge required to function as citizens in the 21st century. Freire's view of education as the practice of freedom and,

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thus, the greatest mechanism for liberation is pushed further away for students who do not have access to new technologies (p. 87). Further, all students need instruction in how to navigate new tools and how to use new digital literacies to advocate for themselves. It is a two-pronged issue where students need access to technology, and they need instruction in how to use it to their best advantage.

Here are two sources related to this topic:

Kersch, D. F.; Lesley, M. 2019. Hosting and healing: A framework for critical media literacy pedagogy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, **11**(3): 37-48.

Lesley, M. 2012. *Invisible Girls: At Risk Adolescent Girls' Writing within and beyond School. Adolescent Cultures, School and Society. Volume 58*. New York, Peter Lang.

DFK: Your academic life is committed to teaching first in secondary schools and nowadays in higher education. What is currently guiding your work at Texas Tech University regarding teacher training?

ML: Currently, I am collaborating with public schools through engaged scholarship projects where I partner with teachers and teacher leaders to design and carry out research over topics that directly impact instruction. With engaged scholarship, new knowledge is co-constructed with a community partner to transform practice. This is a powerful and equity-driven way for schools and universities to work together to bring about positive change for students because research is centered around the process of collaboration. In this collaboration, knowledge is developed through a democratic approach where all stakeholders are viewed as having valuable input. Thus, knowledge is constructed through a two-way exchange. With engaged scholarship, community partners have an equal voice in all aspects of how research is designed, carried out, and the resulting products that arise from the research such as manuscripts and conference presentations. This shifts the power in research relationships from university researcher as expert to university researcher as co-learner. I have also been working with graduate students in mentoring them into this paradigm of research. As the next generation of researchers, I believe it's important for emerging scholars to have experiences learning about this paradigm of research.

Here's a reference that addresses mentoring doctoral students to conduct engaged scholarship:

Lesley, M. K.; Smit, J. 2020. Teaching as We Learn: Mentoring Graduate Students in Engaged Scholarship. *In*: *Preparing Students for Community-Engaged Scholarship in Higher Education.* IGI Global, p. 62-83.

GKS: Can you tell us a little more about this project/research? How is it working?

ML: One engaged scholarship project I have been leading for the past five years has focused on developing writing instruction in an "underperforming" school contending with a high-stake testing culture. Scores on the writing assessment at this school have not made progress for several years. My colleagues and I are working with the literacy coach and the English teachers at the school to develop writing pedagogy that is research based and infused with critical literacy features. We have cultivated a strong relationship with this team of educators and seeing many positive changes in writing pedagogy as a result of this work. Each year, we develop a research question to address. We are beginning to present about this work and publish manuscripts that are co-authored with graduate students. We are

also beginning to publish with our partners from the school, which symbolizes equity in power.

Here's a manuscript that was recently published with several doctoral students.

Smith, P.; Varner, J.; Nigam, A.; Liu, Y.; Lesley, M.; Smit, J.; Burke, D.; Beach, W. 2019. Teaching Writing in the Midst of Fragile Alliances: Insights from Literacy Teacher Educators. *Action in Teacher Education*, 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2019.1658657

GKS: What are those topics you believe that impact instruction?

ML: One of the most prevalent topics that affects instruction in K-12 settings is access to "quality" classroom teachers who are both knowledgeable about evidence-based instructional practices and driven by bringing about social equity through education.

DFK: Could you tell us more about this "quality" you have mentioned?

ML: Many "underperforming" schools struggle with hiring teachers who are knowledgeable about the content area they have been hired to teach. Some are teaching on waivers or have gone through an abbreviated, alternative teacher certification program. Under these circumstances, few teachers develop the skills needed to teach for social change. There is also a great deal of teacher turnover in "underperforming" schools.

GKS and DFK: In Brazil there is a resistance among public school teachers in accept "help" from universities to work together. How does this work there, and how is this knowledge co-constructed?

ML: We have the same resistance in the United States to school-university collaborations. One reason for this is that many schools have developed their own staff or state networks for professional development. The other reason is that schools are driven by standards-based curriculum with its attendant high stakes testing and the emphasis on such approaches to education has ushered in many standardized products such as standardized tests, curriculum, and professional development for teachers from corporations and nonprofit organizations. In many respects the standards movement has created a climate for mechanistic teaching and learning that corporations are profiting from. It has also driven a wedge between schools and universities by making universities seem irrelevant.

GKS: How do you believe we can face that?

ML: I have found collaborating with schools through the vehicle of engaged scholarship to be an important way to combat this trend. University faculty are equipped to conduct research in schools. However, when we approach research from the stance of outside expert, we alienate public school educators and often deepen the chasm between theory and practice. Conducting engaged scholarship provides a way to create a sustained partnership with schools that is beneficial to all stakeholders and combines teaching, research, and service.

DFK and KPM: In post-truth times, where people start reading (and sharing) only what they believe in, what do you think is the most challenging for us who work with development of pre-service teacher and teacher in action? And how could we face those challenges?

ML: This is a concern when one "truth" dominates other ways of knowing. I see this most often occurring with business entities such as charter schools, curriculum developers, and companies that manufacture high stakes tests. These entities are driven by profit and drown out teachers', students', and university researchers' voices. They also reinforce and normalize making educational decisions based on a single standardized test score. It is extremely difficult to teach against this culture. One way I believe we face this challenge is through engaged scholarship, where university researchers are positioned as allies to teachers and administrators in schools instead of in opposition to them. Schools have many critics and many entities that want to manipulate the message of schooling for their own financial gain—to sell products. Under these circumstances, it is essential for university researchers to continue to reflect the realities of schools in ways that demonstrate a long-term commitment to solving educational problems.

DFK: Kellner and Share (2007), wrote the paper *Critical Media Literacy Is Not an Option*, because "it is not available; it is not even on the radar" for our students. Considering the inequalities that characterize our society, they ended their text quoting "critical media literacy is not an option, it is an imperative". As critical media literacies researcher, how would you answer to this quote, a decade later?

ML: I think this sentiment is still relevant today. We still have issues with access to technology for all students. We also have a tremendous need to educate students on ways to use digital media that do not reinforce negative stereotypes, put them at risk for abuse, and empower them. Now more than ever students need to learn about cosmopolitan critical literacy and Internet activism (Lesley and D'Almas, 2016).

KPM: Considering the scenario of the fast arrival of new technologies, which are expected to be used and explored in the most varied classrooms contexts, what are some of the essential skills to be developed in pre-service teachers and encouraged in teachers in action?

ML: One of the major pitfalls I see in schools are teachers using technology for the sake of technology as opposed to using technology as a tool to enhance student learning. The Covid-19 pandemic that forced many schools to rely entirely on digital technologies to provide instruction has given us an inadvertent glimpse into effective ways to integrate new technologies into education. This situation highlighted the great divide between students and school districts with respect to access to technology and WIFI. It also highlighted issues of motivation and engagement with learning through these means for children and adolescents. And, it highlighted the types of technologies that are more effective than others both from the perspective of teachers and students. For instance, many tools such as Flipgrid videos turned out not to be as innovative of a tool for learning as many teachers thought. Consequently, both pre-service and practicing teachers need to think about meaningful learning for students as well as access to digital tools before implementation. We also need to study the ways children and adolescents use digital media before jumping to conclusions about engagement that are not accurate.

GKS: In your paper with Professor Dorotea Kersch you two discuss about how important it is to give students opportunities for them to talk about their personal stories (digitally or not). How could we work with pre-service teachers and teachers in action in order to make them conscious of it?

ML: I think we need to implement methods for using stories about technology with pre-service and practicing teachers in teacher preparation and professional development programs. We need to read students' stories such as the ones we included in this article and have teachers write their own. We need to model effective ways to tell these stories and share them as a pedagogical tool and invite teachers to think deeply about the implications of their practice. We also need to connect these techniques to critical media literacy standards and the framework we created. More of these stories need to be published as well. Stories are a great tool for teaching about and healing from educational and social wrongs.

Kersch, D. F.; Lesley, M. 2019. Hosting and healing: A framework for critical media literacy pedagogy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, **11**(3), 37-48.

GKS: In the same paper you two discuss about equity, in this crisis we are living now with Covid-19, this problem of digital equity is even bigger (not because it was not before, but because now it is easier to see it), specially because private schools in Brazil are able to continue teaching in this period, and public schools (mostly) are not, because they do not have the infrastructure in school and students do not have computers at home as well. This increases not only the digital inequality but also inequality general. How do you see this happening there in the USA? How are schools working now in this period?

ML: Digital equality is a huge problem in the United States, too, in public education. There is a range of experiences for schools depending on three factors: (1) whether the school had a laptop or Chromebook issued to each student in the school prior to Covid-19, (2) whether students have access to WIFI at home even if the school issued a device to them to take home, and (3) teachers' commitment to teaching online. If all three of these pieces are not in place, it is very difficult to have successful and quality teaching and learning under these circumstances. Also, the role of parents and guardians has to be taken into consideration. Not all students will have the same support systems at home to complete assignments. There are also issues of students with disabilities not receiving any modifications or support under these circumstances. What I have seen a great deal of are teachers writing minimal lesson plans and providing no or minimal feedback to students over their work. Teachers' lack of knowledge about teaching online in effective ways has led to tedium for students. Thus, teaching online has become a bit of a void for students. In districts that have weathered a crisis before such as a hurricane that devastated a region, they have handled the Covid-19 pandemic much better. Many of these schools already had contingency plans that included access to technology and training in online instruction for classroom teachers.

KPM: Currently, we can see a very similar scenario here in Brazil, teachers trying to reproduce what they are used to doing in their presential classes in remote assignments. Consequently, those students who have access to the classes are demotivated and bored. This situation is due to the lack of preparation of the

teachers in proposing these classes, which have a different approach as the presential ones and must count with meaningful assignments, as you stated before. Therefore, do you think universities should prepare pre-service teachers for this scenario (of remote classes) which seems to be a reality not only in the present but also in the future of education ahead of us? If yes, how could universities add this to their pre-service teachers' syllabus and which crucial points for this education should be on it?

ML: In the United States, there is a movement toward personalized learning in both online and face-to-face learning spaces. I think this is the key to preparing pre-service teachers for the event of remote learning. In personalized learning, emphasis is placed on the decisions teachers make to develop curriculum that is based on individualized student learning. Digital tools play a central role in this approach to teaching because of the flexibility they afford in developing curriculum. Teacher familiarity with digital tools and assessments that facilitate tailoring instruction to students would help alleviate the issues we are seeing with remote learning due to Covid-19.

GKS and KPM: Considering the Covid-19 pandemic scenario and the attempt of remote classes with some students being disregarded because of their social context, do you think that by discussing digital equity more frequently we could raise awareness to the lack of it and how far we actually are from achieving it in Brazil and in the USA?

ML: Yes, absolutely! Covid-19 has highlighted the disparity between citizens in both countries. Watching school districts scramble to provide WIFI in parking lots and set up places for students to pick up material for lessons and food each week, makes visible the great need of students in public schools. For instance, when students are fed breakfast and lunch at school, food security remains invisible to the public. Now that students' picking up food packs at school is broadcast on television, we are all complicit in the lack of food most children and adolescents have. We are also aware that children only receive two meals for five days a week while school is in session. The same is true for access to technology.

DFK: Everywhere we hear and read that after Covid-19, nothing will be the same. Do you think that this is true? What are the possible consequences you think this will have for education? What is the role of universities and teacher formers in this scenario?

ML: I would like to think that schools and teacher preparation programs will take seriously issues of equal access to technology for all students, using technology as meaningful tools for learning, personalized learning, and critical media literacy education. I also hope Covid-19 will change the face of high stakes testing. However, I suspect there will be superficial attempts at educational reform where more schools will issue Chromebooks and laptops to students and prepare work from home lesson plans. However, I doubt true reform in the way of developing better forms of state assessment and technology integration will occur. Universities could have a critical role to play in preparing both pre-service and practicing teachers to develop these skills but care must be given to how we interact with schools. It is important to work together to address the needs of students and teachers.

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References

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