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Mulcahy, Cara M. (2010). *Marginalized Literacies: Critical Literacy in the Language Arts Classroom*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

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As a volume in the *Contemporary Research in Education* series, this book provokes reconsideration of the established approaches in Writers'/Readers' workshops as originally designed by Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins, and Linda Rief. Clearly stating her premise, Mulcahy argued that all three educators moved literacy beyond conventional, functional, and informational levels, breaking away from traditional approaches, but have not embraced critical literacy. Her purpose is to analyze all three approaches in light of critical literacy in order to improve language arts instruction by paying "particular attention to the social, economic, and political contexts in which schooling and literacy education take place." (p. 128). This five chapter book progressed from definitions of literacy and critical literacy, through discourse analysis of Atwell's *In the Middle* (1998), Calkins' *The Art of*

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teaching writing (1994), and Reif's *Seeking Diversity* (1992) in light of teacher-student power and awareness and inquiry.

In Chapter One, Mulcahy differentiated types of literacy. Defining the functional level as basic skills of reading and writing, she explained how other literacies are increasingly complex. Cultural literacies legitimate certain kinds of knowledge and certain facts, whereas, informational literacy reproduces prescribed curriculum knowledge. Progressive literacy promotes personal growth, failing to question cultural or political contexts; while multimodal literacies go beyond images and words, involving sound, movement, bodily sensations. Multi-literacies, resulting from new communication technologies, impact cultural and linguistic diversity. In light of these distinctions, Mulcahy promoted critical literacy. She identified critical literacy components as aimed at empowering people to think and act reflectively to become change agents who disrupt the commonplace, interrogate multiple viewpoints, and focus on socio-political issues to end oppression and privileging some people over others. She contended at the end of this chapter that the discourse of all three workshop texts had a direct impact on teacher thinking, decision-making, and implementation of the workshop approach.

In Chapter Two, Mulcahy described all three workshops approaches as progressive and student-centered, geared toward student engagement and self-discovery, as envisioned by Donald Graves (1978, 2003), and embracing the tenets of Whole Language (a trusting and respectful community of learners, active readers and writers, entwining product, process and content). She focused on commonalities of time, choice, and response as integral to developing individual voice, positive reinforcement, and interactive conferencing with teacher and peers in a well-organized structure based on rigorous standards. After addressing the flexibility in implementation and describing the teacher's role as facilitator, Mulcahy stressed that student progress stemmed from fostering listening and questioning skills to meet student goals and ability to self-evaluate. She contended, "when students talk, discover, and work together they develop multiple perspectives allowing them to understand and read others better." (p. 43).

In Chapter Three, Mulcahy analyzed each workshop approach in terms of critical literacy. She found the Atwell text to be primarily teacher-centered in knowledge and choice of literature, despite some aspects that encourage student independence. She noted that Calkins spoke of student collaboration, but Mulcahy found teachers set expectations, rituals, and class structures without consulting students. She described Rief as providing greater equality in power sharing than either Atwell or Calkins, due to her focus on student input in recommending book titles, procedures for peer conferencing, determining what to write and which pieces to select for evaluation. She recognized that Rief still expected the teacher to be the ultimate decision-maker, but also credited her with selecting whole class readings on social justice themes. These aspects of the Rief workshop approach touched upon critical literacy and opportunities for students to develop opinions.

In Chapter Four, entitled “Awareness and Inquiry,” Mulcahy asserted that development of critical consciousness raised self and social awareness that led to critical inquiry of the “interconnectedness, the complexities, and the injustices that exist in the world.” (p. 99). She identified shortcomings in all three workshop approaches. Though Atwell aligns with progressive and personal literacies, Mulcahy noted that Atwell promoted cultural, not critical literacy, favoring European authors with a Western perspective as Hirsch (1988) had advocated. Though Calkins addressed careful observation and attention to detail, Mulcahy saw a lack of attention to positionality, power, knowledge, language, and contexts that perpetuate inequitable social structures. As such, Mulcahy described Calkins’ approach as promoting growth of students as writers, rather than as social critics of matters of social justice, race relations, tolerance, and respect for others. Mulcahy showed how Rief attempted to develop student self-awareness, combined with social justice issues, encouraging students to gain insight into human behavior and their personal progress as readers, writers, and learners. However, Mulcahy stated that Rief fell short of engaging students in critical inquiry, critical dialogue, and social action or activism. As a result of these failings of all three approaches to meet critical literacy standards, Mulcahy argued that the omissions raised important questions for literacy education along with new

media that demanded critical inquiry. Ending on a positive note, She assessed that the many features of the workshop approach “appear well-suited to exploring its potential for teaching critical literacy.” (p.129)

In Chapter Five, Mulcahy concluded that more could be accomplished in language arts instruction as it occurs in a workshop format. She reiterated the elements of workshops that meet basic criteria for critical literacy by promoting self-directed, independent learners encouraged “to become adept users of language.” (p.129). However, Mulcahy envisioned explicit encouragement of students to relocate their thinking and writing in terms of historical and cultural contexts, investigating internal structures and interrogating discourse and power to recognize that knowledge is not static or fixed. In her recognition of the transformative power of well-used language to make real changes in the world, Mulcahy’s argument offered teachers suggestions on how to elevate the level of thought and critical inquiry of students who learn in a workshop environment.

The logical approach to this premise and conclusion that a workshop atmosphere is conducive to critical literacy is noteworthy. As Gay (2010) argued in *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*, culture and communication rely heavily on literary skills to search for meaning and convey understanding. In this increasingly complex and globalized, yet technologically connected world, students can only benefit from grappling with real world issues to examine assumptions, value distinctions and challenge stereotypes. Introducing critical literacy in a more specific and emphatic manner purports to better prepare students to evaluate sources, analyze issues, and draw better-informed conclusions. This text becomes a helpful resource to teachers in demonstrating the aspects of each workshop approach that falls short of critical inquiry and in recommending how best to enable students to become more socially aware and active.

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