

## Critical Coaching: Approaching Literacy Coaching through a Critical Lens

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### Introduction

*And no amount of resources or pedagogical strategies will help us to provide the best opportunity for low-income students to reach their full potential as learners if we do not attend first to the stereotypes, biases, and assumptions we have about them and their families.* (Gorski, 2013, p. 69, emphasis added)

coach

a word with images attached  
 of cheering  
 support  
 and praise  
 (maybe a little bit of  
 yelling)

but how do I  
 coach  
 amidst

*our families can't  
 our kids don't even know  
 back to the basics  
 we gotta break it down for them*

your words are breaking down our kids  
 into pieces of themselves--  
 pieces that are not their  
 all

(ironic, since I am a coach  
 of literacy and  
 words and  
 all)

Figure 1. coach.

After a long day of Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings at the Title I elementary school, where I served as a literacy coach, I was left alone in my room with

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the echoes of conversations with teachers throughout the day. I was particularly unsettled this day due to the recurring comments about the kids who “can’t read,” about the families using “Obamaphones,” about the families that “don’t care” enough to send in crayons but will send in candy to decorate milk carton gingerbread houses, and about the families who lack literacy skills to help with reading and homework. As an elementary literacy coach and a former early childhood educator, I recognize that partnerships with families offered rich opportunities for mutually beneficial learning. I began to question: what *was* my role, as an elementary literacy coach, to guide educators into critical awareness of the cultural assumptions we make about families and students, which, as Gorski (2013) reminded us, negatively affect our abilities to scaffold students to reach their full potential? After all, as I said in Figure 1, I was a coach of literacy, words, and *all*.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite an increasingly diverse student population, the demographics of teaching remain largely the same: most educators (myself included) are White, middle-class females (Feistritzer, 2011). Because this identity aligns with dominant ideologies and cultural norms of society, which also become the standards and culture of most schools, these norms might seem invisible and universally shared (Gay, 2010; Jensen, 2005). However, these norms are definitely not invisible nor universal.

While education contributes to learning and knowing, the prevailing culture of school is not designed to recognize the diverse ways of knowing that *all* students, families, and educators alike contribute to learning communities (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Nieto, 2009, 2013). Darder (2002) noted that, "knowledge is dynamically

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produced and emerges out of our relationships with one another and the world.” (p. 66)

However, typically one way of knowing, as embodied in the standards and pre-made curriculum, is positioned as powerful, significant, and correct, while other ways of knowing are not acknowledged as valid and valued.

Instead of viewing schools as sources of powerful fountains of knowledge to deposit into the empty vessels of students and their families (Freire, 1970), educators and educational systems must recognize families from all backgrounds as experts in their own unique ways of knowing, or funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). Literacy coaches are in a unique position to do this work. Coaches can work to improve teachers’ literacy practices and students’ learning outcomes, while simultaneously being public intellectuals who inhabit a political space (Commeyras, 2002; Dozier, 2014). Jones and Rainville (2014b) note that as “literacy coaches position themselves as intellectuals in their in-between-ness, they can encourage, nurture, and participate in collaborative cultures that work on the side of the weak and unrepresented” (p. 187).

To explore my positionality as a literacy coach, a public intellectual, and an advocate underrepresented for students and families, I created a new genre of coaching conversations, which I called critical coaching (Wells, 2017). In the 2015-2016 school year, I developed a critical coaching partnership with Kadence (pseudonym), an early childhood educator at the Title I school where I was serving as a literacy coach.

Together, we engaged in a critical, dialogic partnership that helped both of us to name and frame the assumptions (some covert, and some overt) that we made about students and families, especially students from backgrounds that did not mirror our own. We

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pursued this work in order to take action by joining critical networks for continued growth and reflection, advocating for students and families in public spaces and planning culturally relevant instruction that centers students' and families' many ways of knowing. This case study explored the question: How do critical coaching partnerships develop and what outcomes do they produce?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical theory underlies the present study. First and foremost, “Whiteness is the invisible norm” (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006, p. 35), especially for those who benefit from it. White people carry a multitude of unearned privileges in our invisible knapsacks (McIntosh, 1990), but society teaches us not to see these privileges. The power of Whiteness (Jensen, 2005) comes from the oppression of others (Gay, 2010; Hilliard, 2009; Howard, 2010). Whiteness has also been an invisible norm throughout the history of education—especially literacy education (Gangi, 2008). As educators, we are actors in an educational system designed to preserve the power of one dominant culture (Freire, 1970). However, some theories that problematize Whiteness as an invisible norm include (1) culturally relevant pedagogy, (2) critical race theory, and (3) Freirean emancipatory frameworks.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Building on the work of many notable scholars (i.e., Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009), culturally relevant pedagogy embraces the unique sets of experiences and understandings that all students bring to the classroom by “teach[ing] *to and through* their personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments” (Gay, 2010, p. 26). Gay (2010) described

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four pillars of culturally responsive practice: (1) teacher attitudes and expectations, (2) cultural communication in the classroom, (3) culturally diverse content in the curriculum, and (4) culturally congruent instructional strategies. An important part of culturally relevant pedagogy is recognizing the contributions of all students, not just those from mainstream cultures. Therefore, members of mainstream groups must be aware of their identity profiles and how these identities impact their teaching (Gay, 2010; Harro, 2000b).

### **Critical Race Theory**

In critical race theory (CRT), the lived experiences of minoritized groups are storied and validated by centering “the research, pedagogy, and policy lens on Communities of Color and call[ing] into question White middle class communities as the standard by which all others are judged” (Yosso, 2005, p. 82). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) identify five basic elements of CRT in education: (1) intercentricity of race and racism—that racism is permanent and is more than classism, (2) challenging dominant ideology—problematizing colorblindness, objectivity, neutrality, and meritocracy as a “camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups” (p. 26), (3) commitment to social justice—working to empower minoritized groups and eliminate oppressive structures, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge—using stories to legitimize the lived experiences of people of color, and (5) the transdisciplinary perspective—connecting racist themes in different historical and contemporary contexts.

In education, CRT serves an important role by critiquing deficit theorizing. Yosso (2005) asserted that “one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in U.S. schools is deficit thinking” (p. 75). When deficit assumptions interact with

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instruction, banking models of education become the relied-upon method of teaching, so as to “fill up” students with this supposedly missing knowledge. Garcia and Guerra (2004) found that deficit assumptions in school usually begin with overgeneralizations about family background, which is exactly what Gorski (2013) challenges in the quote opening this article.

### **Freirean Emancipatory Frameworks**

Because language is contextually situated, it is never neutral (Bakhtin, 1981; Freire, 1970; Gee, 2012). Freire (1973) saw the power of critical literacy, which he defined as “an increasingly critical attitude toward the world” (p. 34). As a pedagogical approach, critical literacy found its roots in community and adult education to help learners critique the status quo, develop agency, and accomplish their own goals (Rogers & Mosley Wetzel, 2013). Authentic meaning and experiential knowledge are intrinsic parts of critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Furthermore, Freire (1970, 1973, 1987) saw the power of critical literacy and literacy education for work that included liberating the oppressed.

Freire (1970) also problematized the banking model of education, which assumes the position of an authoritative “teacher” and a “student” as the empty vessel the teacher was to fill with knowledge. Instead, he proposed a problem-posing pedagogical model, in which teacher-student and student-teacher positionality are fluid roles. He believed that true literacy developed with *critical consciousness*, or the ability to see beyond one’s own limited realm of experiences (Freire, 1973). He also advocated for the importance of reflection and action, the combination of which he named *praxis* (Freire, 1970).

Another important concept in Freire's work was *humanization*, which he stated was the vocation of all people. Humanization develops at the intersection of love and dialogue (Freire, 1970). Relationships ground humanization. Freire stated, "to be human is to engage in relationships with others and with the world" (Freire, 1973/2013, p. 3). Humans change their perceptions of reality and develop critical consciousness with active, dialogical communication that is loving, hopeful, and trusting. Freire (1970) recognized the role dialogue, based in love, humility, faith, and hope, played in not only humanization but also in naming and changing the world.

### **Literacy Coaching: A Review of the Literature**

While literacy coaches may have many different roles and responsibilities, some overarching trends and patterns do exist. Dozier (2008) explained, "Literacy coaches support teachers as they develop their professionalism" (p. 11). Traditional coaching responsibilities include: (1) providing teacher support by building trusting relationships, observing teachers' differences and strengths, giving teachers feedback in supportive but non-evaluative ways, and helping teachers plan what comes next, (2) demonstrating strong content knowledge in literacy; (3) establishing a reputation as a strong literacy teacher, and (4) fostering professional learning communities that situate teachers and coaches as learners (Allen, 2005; Bean & DeFord, 2012; Buly, Coskie, Robinson, & Egawa, 2004; Coskie, Robinson, Buly, & Egawa, 2005; Dozier, 2008; ILA, 2005; Shanklin, 2006; Toll, 2005). In addition to these roles, Bean and DeFord (2012) acknowledged that coaches must recognize their own beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning but did not dive into the deeper political nature of cultural biases and assumptions.

To fill these traditional roles, literacy coaches typically participate in preparatory training programs. These trainings tend to focus exclusively on literacy practices (i.e., Jones & Rainville, 2014a; Somerall, 2012). Gangi (2008) studied how these traditional literacy practices are steeped in Whiteness. She analyzed children's literature textbooks, booklists, order forms, and award lists to document the over-representation of resources by and/or about White people. Furthermore, she highlighted the lack of multicultural literature represented in many common professional literacy textbooks, staples in many literacy coaches' professional book collections (see Appendix 1). Gangi asserted, "Lack of equity in representation places an unbearable burden on children of color" (p. 34).

### **Coaching and Family Engagement**

While most of the discourse around coaching focuses on literacy practices in school-based contexts, some literature references literacy coaches' role in family engagement. In Level 3 of "Coaching Activities of Specialized Literacy Professionals" (International Literacy Association, 2015), the final element is "facilitating school-community partnership work" (p. 11). In addition, one of the recommendations for specialized literacy professionals in this research brief, the ILA urged these individuals to "[f]acilitate positive interactions among school and district administrators, principals, classroom teachers, reading specialists, students, and parents" (p. 17).

Kissel, Mraz, Algozzine, and Stover (2011) studied 20 early childhood literacy coaches, all of whom worked in "high risk" schools, at the end of four years' experience to see (1) how the coaches defined their roles and (2) what suggestions they had to change their roles to be more effective in their literacy programs. With a survey and some participant interviews, they found that the early childhood coaches identified areas



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of high priority as being content experts, promoting self-reflection, and facilitating professional development; however, they viewed their role as builders of school-wide literacy communities, with stakeholders such as families and administrators, as a low priority. This study documented how some early childhood literacy coaches viewed family engagement as tangential to their core responsibilities.

### **Coaching and Critical, Dialogic Reflection with Teachers**

Reflection on classroom practice is inarguably a central tenant of responsive literacy coaching (Dozier, 2008). The International Literacy Association's (2015) research brief on specialized literacy professionals recommended that these individuals "[f]ulfill a professional role with respect for others, meaningful interactions with colleagues, and reflection on feedback from other educators and from experiences" (p. 17). For this reflection to be meaningful, coaches must intentionally disrupt traditional role definitions that position them as experts and instead move toward dialogic relationships, which empower coaches and teachers alike.

Several studies focused on dialogic relationships between coaches and teachers. Wall and Palmer (2015) examined the role of instructional coaches to empower teachers through dialogic relationships, using Freire's (1970) five conditions for successful dialogue: love, humility, faith in humankind, hope, and critical thinking. An important finding from analyzing these conversations was in the importance of open-ended questions to counter "the prevailing rushed culture and provide moments of stillness that allow teachers to think deeply and find the answers on their own" (p. 629). Crafton and Kaiser (2011) looked critically at positionality through coach/teacher dialogue in Wenger (1998)'s communities of practice model. While coach/mentor dialogic interactions

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tended to follow a question/answer or initiation, response, evaluation (IRE) sequence with the coach assuming the power with a pre-determined agenda, the community of practice model featured community-oriented dialogue based on questions and concerns teachers posed, molding the “coach” position into more of a facilitator role. Therefore, effective critical reflection with teachers may involve interrupting traditional coach positioning and moving toward a community of practice model.

For meaningful change, therefore, a problem-posing model of professional development that works with, not for, teachers by involving them in determining their own professional development would be more effective than the banking model of professional development that positions educators as “empty vessels” to be filled (Freire, 1970; Reilly, 2014; Skinner et al., 2014; Stover, Kissel, Haag, & Shoniker, 2011).

### **Methodology**

#### **Setting**

This study was completed in partnership with Kadence (pseudonym), an early childhood teacher, in the second semester of the 2015-2016 school year at Meadow Mill Elementary (pseudonym), a Title I school serving a large Latinx community in the Southeastern United States. Kadence joined the study, as an extreme case, (Patton, 2002) because she was the only teacher I met the summer before I officially assumed the literacy coach role at the school who wanted to do more with parent communication. In fact, this request to do more with parent communication preceded her mention of wanting help with her reading and writing instruction, which told me parent communication was very important to her. For contextualization purposes, Table 1 presents the demographic data for her class of 18 students.

Table 1

*Demographic Information from Kadence's Class*

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Description (% of class)</b>
Gender	10 girls (55.6%) 8 boys (44.4%)
Race	10 Latinx (55.6%) 5 White (27.8%) 2 African American (11.1%) 1 Multiracial (White/African American) (5.5%)
Language Spoken in Home	8 Spanish-dominant (44.4%) 10 English-dominant (55.6%)
Free/Reduced Lunch Status	16 free lunch (88.9%) 2 full-pay (11.1%)
STAR Reading Benchmarks (beginning of year)	4 above proficiency (22.2%) 4 met (22.2%) 10 not met (55.6%)

**Methods**

I used an action research-based qualitative study design that featured critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is defined by “its concern with power as a central condition in social life, and its efforts to develop a theory of language that incorporates this as a major premise” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 10). This focus on power, or the macro structures of culture and society, sets CDA apart from traditional discourse analysis, which focuses only on the micro structures of language in the specific interactional event at hand (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005).

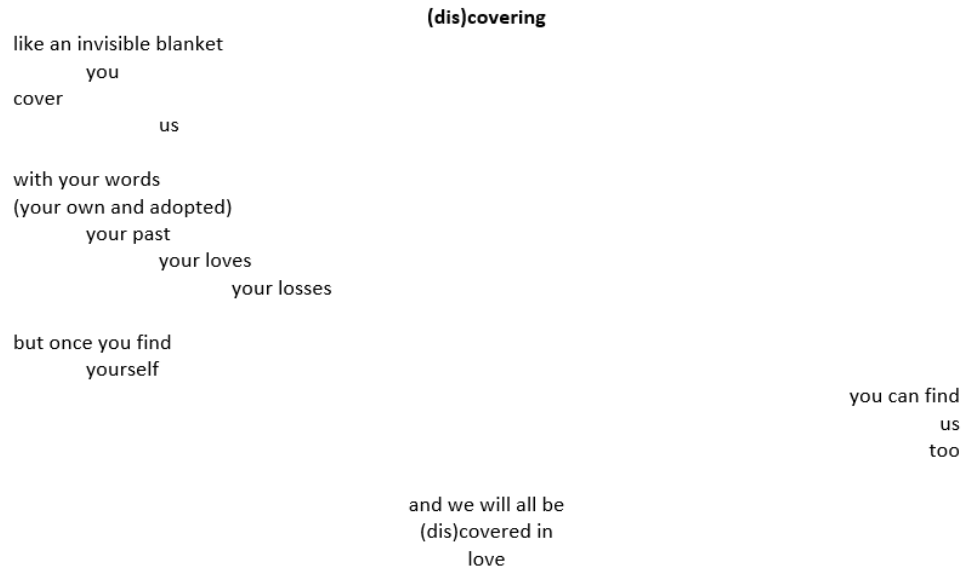
I gathered data from a variety of sources, including (1) observations, which I completed while co-teaching with Kadence, (2) weekly participant reflections, which Kadence and I completed in a private Google doc as a collaborative reflective journal, (3) a cultural memoir that we both wrote and discussed, (4) semi-structured interviews, which I completed with Kadence at the beginning and end of the study, and (5) critical

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coaching conversations, which I recorded and transcribed. Our critical coaching conversations occurred about once or twice a month in Kadence's classroom, at the end of the school day. I structured these conversations to follow a flexible framework, which began with a shared reading I collected from either professional articles I read as a graduate student or digital texts I discovered on social media with real-world, timely significance. After we each read the text, our conversations evolved organically to relate to instructional practice, such as family engagement, selection of children's literature, planning culturally relevant instruction, or advocating for students and families.

I used Atlas-ti to analyze my data recursively throughout the data collection and analysis process (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). I invited Kadence to reflect on episodes of significance or interest at the end of our research partnership, but I completed the majority of the data analysis to avoid adding additional responsibilities to her busy schedule. I applied thematic analysis, using the constant comparative method and open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and critical discourse analysis (using adapted basic theoretical tools of Bloome et al., 2005) to discover themes and patterns. I then used that analysis to compose analytic poetry.

## Findings and Discussion



*Figure 2.* (dis)covering.

As I analyzed the data to explore how critical coaching partnerships develop and what outcomes they produce, I found that critical coaching relied upon two cyclically related components: (1) studying ourselves and (2) taking action, as referenced in Figure 2 (Wells, 2017).

### Studying Ourselves

Studying ourselves as educators was the first step in the journey toward taking action in our critical coaching partnership. This self-study aligned with Rogers and Schaenen (2013)'s critical discourse analysis (CDA) study design elements of reflexivity, which includes the researcher; context, which considers social, cultural, political, and economic domains, and deconstructive-reconstructive orientations, which involves both critiquing power and creating spaces for new power structures. Analysis of the critical coaching conversations revealed themes about how Kadence and I enacted our identities

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as cultural beings as well as naming and challenging the assumptions we held about our students and their families.

**Identities as cultural beings:** Our identities seemed to be particularly shaped by three key elements: family, education, and critical moments. Our family experiences both did and did not align with mainstream norms (i.e., both of our families supported our educational journeys; however, my family had divorced parents and Kadence was adopted), and sometimes these misalignments sometimes led to conflict (i.e., Kadence having different religious beliefs from her parents). For both of us, education was a transformative experience because we both enjoyed and excelled at learning. Our critical moments, which align with the waking up stage of Harro's (2000a) cycle of liberation, both influenced us as people and as educators. My critical moment occurred when a mother of a former student called me a racist (Wells, 2014), and I began a continuing journey to understand racism and oppression. Kadence's critical moment occurred when she came out to her parents. In her cultural memoir, she reflected on her realization that a vital aspect of her identity was not safe to share with her family, some friends, and most co-workers, forcing her to conceal it. However, her experience of hiding herself to fit within mainstream cultural norms was a difficult one, and she did not want her students to suffer the same fate.

Once we identified significant components of our identities as cultural beings, our next step was to move toward naming and challenging assumptions that we held in spite of our critical moments.

**Naming and challenging assumptions:** Throughout our conversations, our implicit assumptions often surfaced. I made assumptions about Kadence's identity and

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our families' literacy skills. First and foremost, I assumed that Kadence shared many of my cultural norms because she presented as a White female teacher. However, these external appearances ignored two critical aspects of her identity: her sexual orientation and her family structure, which involved her own adoption (hence the adoption allusion in Figure 2). As for my assumptions about families' literacy skills, one specific instance occurred when I asked families to complete a survey (beyond the scope of this article but explained in Wells, 2017), and I noticed some families did not complete the short answer questions. My first thought was that the Spanish-dominant families lacked the literacy skills needed to decode and respond to these questions, but I noticed that this trend did not confine itself only to the Spanish-dominant families. While skipping written responses could be tied to literacy skills, it could also be related to lack of interest in the topic, or simply lack of time. My assumption unfairly positioned Spanish-dominant families as less literate. When I caught this assumption as I analyzed data, I shared my assumption and how I had revised my thinking with Kadence in our next coaching conversation.

One noteworthy event that allowed us to name and challenge our assumptions that limited our students and families arose as Kadence and I began planning a life cycles unit that ended the school year. To integrate authentic audiences for a letter writing genre study, Kadence suggested peer pen pals with another class on the grade level. To increase opportunities for family engagement, I asked if she would be interested in having her students write letters to their families too. At first, Kadence seemed to take up this idea, but she began to doubt the success of the project when she realized it would involve families responding to the letters. She justified this doubt by establishing a

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history of families' lack of literacy and lack of participation, providing an example of struggles to "get back a signature" (personal communication, May 11, 2016, line 9) from some families. She surmised that since some families did not provide a signature, a very brief act of participation their participation in a more extended product, like a letter, was improbable. I pushed back to validate family participation by asking, "Is a letter different than a signature?" (personal communication, May 11, 2016, line 11). For the rest of our interaction, Kadence and I continue to develop these two ideas or themes. When Kadence took the floor, she challenged my theme or reinstated her own, and I did the same when I took the floor. However, a significant change occurred near the end of the episode, as shown in Figure 3.



138	<b>Melissa:</b> Um, you said--	
139	<b>Kadence:</b> I—	Contextualization:
140	<b>Melissa:</b> --one of your students is--?	Interruption (incomplete)
141	<b>Kadence:</b> Esmeralda has, I've seen, cause she	Intertextuality: Student
142	wrote a Mother's Day card?	story
143	<b>Melissa:</b> Mmhmm	
144	<b>Kadence:</b> And for her mom, she wrote it in English	
145	and in Spanish.	
146	<b>Melissa:</b> That's cool!	
147	<b>Kadence:</b> Right?	
148	<b>Melissa:</b> That's really cool!	
149	<b>Kadence:</b> Yeah. So she would write a, a sentence	
150	in English? And then translate it to Spanish. A	
151	sentence in English? Translate it to Spanish. So	K takes up current
152	ssshhhhe might can.	theme (#4 Family
153	<b>Melissa:</b> <u>That's really cool.</u> What if we... just asked	participation)
154	the families to communicate us, with us however	Contextualization:
155	they feel comfortable.	Overlap (agreement)
156	<b>Kadence:</b> Yeah.	K continues theme
157	<b>Melissa:</b> They might even draw us pictures if they	Boundary making:
158	don't feel comfortable with—	Pictures and words
159	<b>Kadence:</b> A letter?	count as writing,
160	<b>Melissa:</b> Writing... words.	participation
161	<b>Kadence:</b> Yeah.	
162	<b>Melissa:</b> And then let's just see what happens?	
163	<b>Kadence:</b> OK	
164	<b>Melissa:</b> Let's see how they communicate, we	Boundary making:
165	could even get the kids to help us problem-solve.	Students as resources
166	<b>Kadence:</b> Yeah. And I'll remind the kids that they	Theme modified: #4a
167	can even write to a brother or sister. Cause most	Family participation with
168	of the time brothers and sisters... <i>they</i> can write	assistance from students
169	and, obviously can write in English, and they can	
170	translate and all that kinds of stuff. Or maybe they	
171	can even ask a brother or sister to write the letter	
172	<i>for</i>	
173	<b>Melissa:</b> Mmhmm	
174	<b>Kadence:</b> the mom or dad.	

Figure 3. Excerpt from Family Letters Episode: Lines, transcript, and analysis.

For the first time in this episode, Kadence took up the theme of family participation based on something she has seen work in her own classroom: Esmeralda's bilingual assets.

This encounter established the importance of starting with what teachers know is possible

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when it comes to challenging previously-held assumptions and moving toward taking action.

### **Taking Action**

The second component of critical coaching moved toward taking action, which aligned with Rogers and Schaenen (2013)'s critical discourse analysis (CDA) study design element of social action, or making a political commitment in the world. We made this commitment in three separate areas: critical networks; advocacy in public spaces; and culturally relevant pedagogy.

**Critical networks.** In addition to the private network Kadence and I formed through our coaching conversations, I also recognized the significance of extended critical networks in providing social support for this work. These critical networks came from three sources: social media, communities of co-workers, and children's literature (Wells, 2017).

Social media and communities of co-workers both provided necessary resources to examine and rewrite the deficit narratives we unpacked in our coaching conversations. I used social media (specifically Twitter and Facebook) to curate readings that addressed oppression in current-day contexts to open our coaching conversations. One example was the short graphic story, "On A Plate" (Morris, 2015), which shows how two children grow up experiences differing levels of privilege and how their life trajectories change as a result. In addition to the critical networks I participated in on social media, I discovered the critical nature of networks in communities of co-workers. I called it a "subversive little network" (personal communication, May 19, 2016, line 1355) because challenging the status quo to move toward equity for groups that are often minoritized or oppressed

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can be uncomfortable and therefore becomes avoided work, especially by individuals who benefit from the existing system. For this reason, finding networks of educators who are willing to do this difficult work builds a supportive, resource-sharing community.

The final source of critical networks for us was in children’s literature and its power to offer readers, including ourselves, windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) as we reflect upon our own lived experiences and peer or step into the lived experiences of others. In an early coaching conversation, Kadence recognized that most books are “geared towards more middle class” and worried that her students “can’t hardly relate to them” (personal communication, February 16, 2016, lines 221-223). We worked together to analyze several books that she had used in recent read-alouds in a chart I designed called “Voices/Perspectives in Read-Alouds” (Figure 4).

Voices/Perspectives in Read-Alouds

Book	Race	Gender	Religion	Sexuality	Family Composition	SES
<i>Abe Lincoln's Dream</i>						
<i>My name is Truth</i>	black	woman	God, Christianity	heterosexual		
<i>Float no words</i>	white	boy		heterosexual	dad+mom?	middle class (clothes, newspaper house)
<i>Blackout</i>						
<i>Imaginary Fred</i>						
<i>Don't Let the Pidgeon Drive the Bus</i>						
<i>Junie B. Jones</i>						
<i>Last Stop on Market Street</i>	African American	boy woman	Church	?	boy + nanny	low or middle class

Whose voice is heard? Whose voice is not heard? How is the story shaped by these voices (or not)?

Figure 4. Voices/perspectives in read-alouds.

As we filled out this chart, I was surprised by the amount of negotiating and text-dependent analysis we engaged in to arrive at our conclusions. For example, in *Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Peña, 2015), one of the students assumed the main character C.J.

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was Hispanic because he had brown skin. In my reading of the story, I assumed he was African American because of his skin color and the African American Language reflected in the dialogue between him and his grandmother. Kadence initially thought he was Hispanic but then revised her theory to mirror my own after I showed her evidence in the text informing my transaction. (It is worth noting that the book's illustrator, Christian Robinson, identifies as African American and crafted C.J.'s illustrated identity to be African American.) Even though we did not complete the entire chart together, the joint transactional process raised critical awareness of representation in children's literature. For example, we noticed that a majority of the books on the list (*Abe Lincoln's Dream*, *Float*, *Blackout*, *Imaginary Fred*, and *Junie B. Jones*) featured White main characters, which centered and normalized Whiteness in classroom read-alouds. Even books that feature inanimate or animal characters, such as *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*, frequently represent White culture and reinforce assumptions of colorblindness (Boutte, Hopkins, & Waklatski, 2008). Awareness of this lack of diversity in many popular and award-winning read-alouds, alongside the ability to critique which mainstream identities tend to be over-represented in these texts, can help with the intentional selection of diverse children's literature in future instruction for both literacy coaches and teachers.

**Advocacy in public spaces.** In addition to establishing and continuing to develop critical networks, critical coaching also involved advocacy in public spaces. As educators, these public spaces ranged from formal contexts at school such as scheduled meetings with peers and administrators, to impromptu conversations in less formal settings, such as the playground. The first step was finding our voices.

*Finding our voices.* Both Kadence and I shared numerous examples of encounters with other educators, including co-workers, which involved assumptions about shared cultural norms, often with deficit views of students and families. Over time, we discovered a four-part, non-linear pattern in our responses to these situations. I called this pattern an “action trajectory of finding voices” (Wells, 2017), and I created a visual to represent this trajectory in Figure 5.

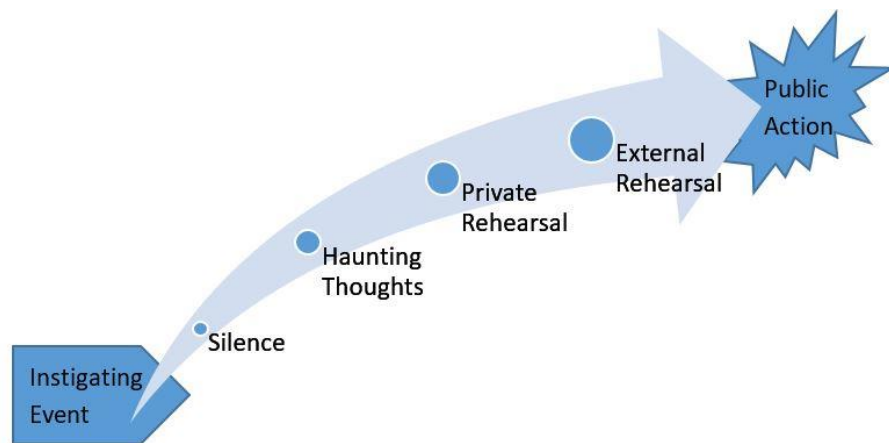


Figure 5. Action trajectory of finding voices.

Silence involved the initial lack of response to an instigating event. Typically, haunting thoughts followed silence, as Kadence explained, “Like afterward, I could not stop *thinking* about it” (personal communication, March 24, 2016, line 1222). Haunting thoughts also included a feeling of guilt for not speaking up. After the initial paralysis of silence and haunting thoughts, we moved toward action by first privately rehearsing potential responses and then bringing these responses to an external rehearsal. This rehearsal usually occurred in a community of trust, such as the critical coaching partnership with Kadence and myself. The final step of this action trajectory is public action with a rehearsed and refined response ready to implement when a situation similar to the instigating event arises again. This process tended to follow this order of elements,

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but it was not strictly linear; the process of finding voices may skip certain elements or pursue them in a different order. Once this process was completed for one specific initiating event, such as a stereotypical or microaggressive comment, the rehearsed responses became part of an arsenal of responses ready for future encounters similar in nature. If different stereotypical or microaggressive comments are encountered in the future, this process begins anew.

**Culturally relevant pedagogy.** The final space Kadence and I engaged in as a form of taking action involved culturally relevant pedagogy. While advocating for students and families in public spaces was important, advocating for their cultures and their ways of knowing in the classroom has an immediate impact on their learning, identities, and lives. Therefore, both planning for and the enactment of culturally relevant pedagogy were forms of critical classroom-based action in our study.

To coach Kadence into planning for culturally relevant instruction, I co-planned a unit with her about life cycles near the end of our partnership. Kadence selected this topic both because it was in the standards and because students were expressing interest in this topic through their interactions with bugs at recess (which, unfortunately, involved some bug-squishing incidents). I saw the students' behavior toward bugs as positioning the bugs as "Other" with rights inferior to their own. I understood the students' play of power with bugs as an opportunity to incorporate several of the basic elements of Critical Race Theory (CRT), such as challenging dominant ideologies, making a commitment to social justice, and centering experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). To involve families in the unit, Kadence asked them to send her photographs of living things that students encountered in their daily life. We also incorporated social justice themes

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into the unit by using the book *Hey Little Ant* (Hoose & Hoose, 1998) to investigate issues of power and rights of living things to unpack the bug squishing at recess. We also planned to study ageism as a social justice theme due to an interesting connection Kadence made between age and power based on the bug squishing episode.

“Cause we could even break that into like a caterpillar’s? Kind of like... not a... child? But kind of like a child? And then the butterfly’s like an adult? So is it OK to do things to... children? But not... adults? Maybe I’m going way too far into it” (personal communication, May 11, 2016, lines 181-188).

This moment captured two important elements: Kadence’s deep thinking but also her self-doubt. As a literacy coach, my position came with embedded power: coaches may be perceived as “experts.” Therefore, critical coaching involved making intentional re-negotiation of this power through shared decision making. To affirm her ideas in situations such as this one, my responses tended to be either statements validating Kadence’s contributions (“No! I think that would be interesting!”, line 189) or questions to defer back to Kadence and build her self-efficacy.

### **Implications**

Based on the data collected from interviews and coaching conversations with Kadence and the body of literature I reviewed, I offer the following essential conditions for entering critical coaching partnerships (Wells, 2017).

1. *Deliberate power-sharing between coach and teacher.* Because the positionality of a literacy coach comes with implicit assumptions of power, deliberate moves to address this power can create more equitable, power-sharing spaces between literacy coaches and teachers in critical coaching partnerships. I navigated this

space with Kadence by sharing decisions and positioning myself as a learner and co-participant.

2. *Willingness to engage in critical self-reflection.* Through candid conversations, reflections, and written cultural memoirs, Kadence and I identified significant sources of socialization, including critical moments that highlighted mismatches between our socializations and others', that contributed to our cultural norms and assumptions in areas such as beliefs, gender, sexual orientation, language, social class, race/ethnicity, physical ability, and other facets of sociocultural identity. Investigating not only what teachers and coaches have been socialized to believe in these various aspects of identity but also *how* we have received these messages, is a helpful first step in recognizing ethnocentrism and beginning to move beyond it. In engaging in this critical self-reflection as educators, we create opportunities for others, for "a humanizing education is the path through which men and women can become conscious about their presence in the world" (Darder, 2002, p. 34).
3. *Critical networks.* Because learning is social and we grow by surrounding ourselves with more experienced others, critical networks are key. While the critical coaching partnership itself is a critical network on a micro level, critical networks can branch out beyond this partnership and may include spaces such as social media, communities of co-workers, and children's literature. This allowed us to consider books that served as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) into the lived experiences of ourselves and others and determine how literature did not serve these purposes. Reflecting on Freire's work, Darder



(2002) recognized, “Through the building of ethical communities for struggle and change, we can develop the critical strength, reflective ability, political knowledge, social commitment, personal maturity, and solidarity across our differences necessary to reinvent our world” (p. 29).

4. *Engagement resources to stretch our thinking.* I often curated digital texts from my critical networks on Facebook or Twitter to share with Kadence at the beginning of our coaching conversations. Other resources came from websites like Teaching Tolerance, such as the “Speaking Up” guide. These engagement resources instigated conversations during the shared reading experience, which positioned both teacher and coach as learners reflecting on how these resources impacted our respective educational roles and contexts. Table 2 includes some of the specific resources Kadence and I used to spark discussion in our coaching conversations.

Table 2

*Selected Resources Used in Coaching Conversations*

<b>Resource</b>	<b>Description</b>
<a href="#">“On A Plate”</a>	This digital comic shows how two children, Richard and Paula, grow up with different circumstances and how these circumstances play out in regards to equity and access as they grow up.
<a href="#">“How Teachers Can Be Better: A Call for Cultural Knowledge in the Classroom”</a>	In this 2016 article, the author reflects on her fears for her own son, who is about to encounter the American public-school system as an African American boy, and challenges teachers to think beyond their own cultural contexts.
<a href="#">“Speaking Up at School”</a>	This resource from Teaching Tolerance provided helpful frameworks, such as echoing, education, interrupting, and questioning, when faced with biased language in school settings.
<a href="#">“10 Simple Ways White People Can Step Up to Fight Everyday Racism”</a>	Because Kadence and I both identify as White females, this reading was important for us to situate our privileged identities within specific ways for us to take action to address manifestations racism.

## Current events

While the readings above provide foundational readings for critical coaching partnerships, other readings can be curated from current events; after all, “reading the world always precedes reading the word” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35) and using current events as texts keep the critical coaching relationships timely and relevant. One current event Kadence and I explored together was House Bill 1 in North Carolina (which, in 2016, limited bathroom access for transgender students to the gender identified on their birth certificate).

5. *Trusting spaces for finding our voices.* Even though the action trajectory of finding our voices (Figure 5) did not require following each step consecutively, trust was an underlying factor in this work. Kadence and I used our critical coaching space to rehearse potential responses and receive feedback to revise these responses before implementing them in public spaces.
6. *Awareness of current events and/or global context.* As Kadence and I contextualized our conversations, we often alluded to student/family stories, stories of interactions with other teachers or co-workers, and stories of real-world events. Additionally, planning culturally relevant, social justice-oriented instruction that addresses current events also requires an awareness of global context. Therefore, critical coaching depends on awareness of current events on a global scale that may impact classroom instruction culture in expected or unexpected ways.
7. *Realistic urgency.* Kadence and I both felt the urgency of the work we completed in our critical coaching partnership, especially relating to family engagement and planning culturally relevant pedagogy. However, we also recognized the daily realities of public education, such as standardization and the challenges these

realities posed to our work. Freire recognized indispensable qualities of progressive teachers among them humility, courage, tolerance, and the tension between patience and impatience. In this tension, Freire recognized the impatience of urgency but the required patience to reflect and take thoughtful action (Darder, 2002). This realistic urgency is an ethical responsibility of engaging in a critical coaching partnership. The work is challenging, self-reflective and evolving, and for the most part, beyond the status quo of public education. Therefore, this work has the potential to place educators in vulnerable positions, and the literacy coach in the partnership must recognize the ethical responsibility to support the educators engaging in this work.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

Critical coaching offers several opportunities for further research. I offered some analysis of the discourse Kadence and I used in our coaching conversations, but additional analysis of the turn-taking structures in critical coaching conversations would be needed. Similarly, further discourse analysis of interactions between Kadence and myself, as we negotiated planning culturally relevant planning, is of interest but beyond the scope of the present study. Further studies that implement critical discourse analysis in classroom settings involving culturally relevant pedagogy are needed.

Finally, Kadence and I both wondered if critical coaching would be possible with a teacher who might be perceived as resistant to such work. Because Kadence had already asked me for help strengthening her home/school communication, she was a willing participant who was personally invested in the outcomes of the study. Jones and Rainville (2014a) called for coaches to enter teachers' spaces gently with a desire simply

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to understand, and forcing teachers to enter critical coaching partnerships violates this call. Working with teachers who are perceived as resistant without forcing them to engage in critical coaching could be an interesting source of data, though it may be a challenging space to find data. Alternative forms of critical coaching, such as group interactions in team meetings, may be spaces ripe for further research, though group and individual coaching conversations are different in nature.

### **Conclusion**

Gorski (2013) challenged educators to “attend to the stereotypes, biases, and assumptions we have about [students] and their families” (p. 69) in order to provide low-income students with the best educational opportunities possible. Critical coaching is one tool that can guide early childhood educators into this vital work. Critical coaching provides a means to name and frame the dominant ideological norms that many educators (c)overly possess, challenge the assumptions these norms influence, especially when these assumptions position minoritized students in deficit narratives, and move toward public action that creates new possibilities for educators, families, and students alike through critical networks, public advocacy, and culturally relevant pedagogy.

As I mentioned in Figure 2, our prior experiences and social groups that informed our identities, cultural norms, and assumptions come together to weave an invisible blanket of socialization, which may [un]intentionally cover others. Once we see the threads that join together in this blanket of socialization, we can see how these threads also tie our own identities as cultural beings to our performed identities as educators. Naming these pieces of ourselves, reflecting on how they impact students and families, and re-weaving these threads to discover new worlds of possibilities with and for students

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and families is indeed an act of humanization and love, an act that can—and should—be an inherent aspect of literacy coaching.

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