

# Positioning Prospective Teachers' Awareness of Classroom Learning Climate: A Critical Literacy Context

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**ABSTRACT:** The focus of this presentation is primarily related to the second part of a multi-dimensional study that includes a unique pedagogical approach to advance prospective teachers' understanding of critical literacy. The instructional strategy is implemented in a mandatory third-year undergraduate concurrent Education course of study for all students enrolled in the Intermediate/Senior program (qualifications to teach grades 10 to 12). In small groups, the prospective teacher students are required to script and record a video presentation that examines, in a systematic process of case-deconstruction, the effects and outcomes of a case-based dilemma (the course is delivered in Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model that includes a social-constructivist approach to learning). The PBL instructional approach is intended to scaffold prospective teachers' awareness of certain concepts (as will be discussed in the presentation) in the broader context of critical literacy. In turn, the critical literacy framework serves as the conceptual platform that positions prospective teachers to be increasingly aware of the implications on case-based K to 12 students' engagement in classroom learning climates that tolerate anti-intellectualism, conformity, and prejudice.

**KEYWORDS:** critical literacy, prospective teacher development

## Introduction

Case studies contribute to prospective teachers' critical reflection and thinking by encouraging them to consider the implications of theory and practice. In the context of teacher education programs, case studies can be particularly beneficial in prospective teachers' negotiation of the key issues and central developments as they relate to case-subject teaches, students, school administrators, and other stakeholders. Case studies represent an "active pedagogical practice" that enables prospective teachers to better understand the complexities of teaching and learning (Naumes & Naumes 1999, 11; see also, Brown & Kraehe 2010).

As Laskey (2005) states, prospective teachers have apprenticed as students in public-school classrooms over the course of their kindergarten to grade 12 education. There exists ample research that attests to the significance of inviting prospective teachers to reflect critically on their immediate experiences as teacher-education students in the broader context of their prior experiences as students. The Problem Based Learning Model (PBL) discussed in this paper uses a constructivist framework. The case-studies present prospective teachers with opportunities to integrate their new learning with prior experiences and perceptions (Altinyelken, 2011; Chicoine, 2004). In this way, prospective teachers' knowledge is aligned to their own experiences as students and to the social context of the case study (Chaille 2008; Harfitt & Chan 2017). In some respects, this approach is reminiscent of Dewey's learner-centred pedagogical focus (Dewey 1938). The hybrid PBL platform provides an avenue for prospective teachers to consider and examine their perceptions, including their biases and assumptions of the various case-based circumstances (Kroth & Boverie 2000; McGoldrick et al. 2001).

The hybrid Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model is implemented in a third-year course of a teacher education program in a mid-sized university in Canada. It is a six-year concurrent education program of study. It is important to note that the PBL model under discussion is a hybrid of the strategies that were traditionally implemented in medical and legal education

programs (Cherubini 2020). The model's inquiry process contributes to its distinction. The prospective teachers enrolled in the Intermediate/Senior teaching qualification program have the opportunity to exercise their agency as critical independent and collaborative thinkers by determining the specific needs of their case-based learning, outlining the central objectives of each inquiry, consulting external resources to inform their decision-making, and examine multiple perspective and viewpoints. Prospective teachers assume an active role in the process of their own thinking and reasoning about the case-based outcomes and consequences (Cherubini 2019).

### **Context: A Hybrid Problem-Based Learning Model**

The hybrid PBL model presented in this paper enables prospective teachers, as active agents in their own learning, to reflect critically upon the case-based circumstances, the theory learned in their teacher education coursework, and their own perceptions of teaching and learning based on their experiences in public education. Hence, the necessary reflection includes a systematic process where prospective teachers cultivate their thinking to make sense of the case outcomes (see, for example, King 2000; Vijaya Kumari 2014). Prospective teachers can discuss, in organized and timely manner, the emerging themes and developments of each case with their peers (Brooks & Brooks 1999).

As presented in Cherubini (2021), the hybrid PBL model includes a specific implementation process in order for prospective teachers to participate in the respective case-based inquiries. As also discussed in Cherubini (2017), the implementation process can be readily modified to accommodate the various needs of each cohort of students. Each prospective teacher is tasked with the responsibility to, first, individually read the case. They are then invited to note (with little to no consideration for grammar and syntax) the key ideas and possibly even themes that emerge after this preliminary reading. In small groups, each cohort is provided with the necessary time to discuss the ideas and themes of the case-inquiry. In the week between classes, each prospective teacher assumes the responsibility to consult with either a professional educator, a relevant interprofessional, a parent/caregiver of a school-aged student relatively close in age to the case-based student, or two peer-reviewed academic journals relevant to the case inquiry. During the subsequent class, each cohort is provided with the necessary time and space to exchange, consider, and discuss each other's findings and perspectives. This component of the process cannot be rushed as prospective teachers often invest considerable time in discussing the opposing views that surface as they relate to the respective tensions inherent in the case-based dilemmas. These tensions are then discussed, through a planned sequence of instruction, in the context of the professional and ethical responsibilities and expectations of teacher in Ontario (Adoniou & Gallagher 2017; Sachs, no date; Santoro, Reid, Mayer, & Singh 2012).

The PBL accounts for the implications of theory and practice on prospective teachers' learning and recognizes the significance of providing the necessary structure for them to collaborate meaningfully. Since the issues in each of the respective cases vary widely, prospective teachers are required to think critically upon their perspectives and reflect upon their learning through other informed viewpoints. The inquiry process intentionally situates prospective teachers in the professional and ethical tension of each case as it facilitates opportunities for them to reflect upon the respective implications of what they experienced as public-school students, their current learning in the teacher education program, and how they perceive these implications on their eventual practice as teachers (Cherubini 2017).

### ***Theoretical Context***

It should be noted that each prospective teacher cohort is responsible for producing a video presentation that explores, discusses, and examines the tensions in a case. By focusing on one

lens (for example, the “Learners” lens considers how case-based learners are treated in different classrooms and their potential to contribute meaningfully to class discussions).

In certain instances, prospective teachers integrate their understanding of the concepts related to successful and nurturing classroom climates to better understand the case complexities (Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan 2011). Prospective teachers consider various human development theories that point to the significance of students’ interactions with teachers and peers in public schools that, in some instances, can be associated to their academic achievement (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006; Greenberg et al. 2003). In the process of examining cases, each prospective teacher cohort considers the nature of the classroom interactions as they impact upon case-based students’ social and academic standing, their classroom behaviour, and emotional and behavioural development (Ingemarson, Rosendahl, Bodin, & Birgegard 2020; Pas et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2016)

### **Educational Significance: Critical Literacy**

Prospective teachers’ participation in the hybrid PBL model under discussion includes a heightened awareness of how nurturing classroom climates contribute to student development. Through the systematic process in place that facilitates peer discussion of competing perspectives, prospective teachers are better positioned to reflect upon how case-based students create meaning from their social interactions in the classroom. Prospective teachers perceive the significance of peer-to-peer and student-teacher professional relationships that can both complement student engagement in their education, as it can contribute to their sense of alienation. The hybrid PBL model facilitates prospective teachers’ understanding of the descriptive definitions of the components related to classroom climate.

Like the context of the preliminary study, prospective teachers develop a greater awareness of the implications of critical literacy on their practice. Hence, for these prospective teacher students, “literacy is about more than reading or writing – it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture” (OME Language Document 2006, 3). The case-inquiry process brings to light prospective teachers’ understanding of the adverse effects of anti-intellectualism in classrooms where case-based students discount the value of their learning and do not perceive relevance to the content. Relatedly, prospective teachers discuss and critically examine the consequences of anti-intellectualism on students’ learning and esteem in situations where case-based teachers consider less academically inclined students as incapable of learning abstract concepts and reading sophisticated texts. Prospective teachers understand critical literacy to include the implications related to conformity. The case-inquiry process is instrumental in providing prospective teachers with opportunities to examine the implications on both student learning and teachers’ pedagogy in cases where students do not conform to classroom and school expectations. They struggle with questions about how to maintain respectful peer relationships and a nurturing classroom climate in cases where students refuse to conform to school and/or teacher’s expectations. Quite interestingly, they also wonder about the implications of asking students to conform at the price of their creative expression. Last, the PBL model enables prospective teachers to examine and reflect upon issues of prejudice and intersectionality as they relate to the properties of critical literacy (including social practices and relationships, language, and culture). Here, too, the cases provide opportunities for prospective teachers to think individually and collectively about the challenges of honouring students’ unique identities as individuals and learners. While they understand that each student’s voice is important, the cases present circumstances where voices often intersect and oppose one another. Certainly, prospective teachers can appreciate the significance of dialogue and open communication towards establishing a nurturing learning climate, but they also examine the difficulty of doing so successfully as a beginning teacher.

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