None but our Words: Critical Literacy in Classroom and Community
Chris Searle (1998)


This is a book to get the heart racing. It is written by a man with an extraordinary history as a teacher of English and literacy. As Colin Lankshear explains, in a brilliant foreword to the book, ‘Chris Searle does not write as an individual but rather as a representative of his social class and its educational tradition’. None but our Words is about teachers and students learning about language and literacy working together as a community based around working class culture and politics. It is unique in documenting work with students in schools where learning literacy is combined with learning about society with its joys and its struggle. Chris Searle’s work in schools was deeply influenced by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and Searle brought critical literacy from this tradition to the classrooms of Britain. Here, he explains the principles behind his approach and describes the children, the work and the schools where it all happened. This is a book that must be read by all practising and student teachers of literacy and English to help remember and resurrect truly radical approaches to literacy teaching.

I should say at this point, that this book is also out of print. But it is not unavailable and can be found in libraries, second-hand bookshops and from large internet booksellers. It is worth seeking out.

Like Paulo Freire, Chris Searle passionately believed that language and action were inseparable. ‘Literacy was to understand the world and then change it’ (p.7). Freire was dedicated to the belief that learning literacy and revolutionary activity were the same. This is often ignored by many modern critical literacy theorists, but is central to the work of Chris Searle. I see it as a challenge to post-structuralists’ accounts of power and education who tend to recoil at any perspective that positions class struggle as central to approaching literacy practice. For this reason alone it is a refreshing contribution to descriptions of the teaching of critical literacy.

In this book, Searle provides teachers with a practice for working class communities and schools. There is much scholarship and practice in critical literacy traditions that advocates teachers understanding the literacy practices of children from different socio-cultural backgrounds. This book offers a simple but enriching idea which goes beyond just understanding the backgrounds of the students. For Freire, teachers, like political leaders, from the middle classes, must recognise, then renounce their own class origins and join those for whom they are to teach. Solidarity must be formed so that an equal dialogue between teachers and students can be established. At this point teachers are also students and students are also teachers. Hierarchies are broken down. This perspective greatly influences Searle’s approach.

This is not easy for teachers at any time in history, not just today. In an early chapter on principles, Searle recognises the difficulties in working in this way:

The development of dialogue-based pedagogy and critical literacy is not an easy task in such a system where all is to be prescribed, outcomes to be pre-ordained, examined by ceaseless testing and overseen by Ofsted... the obstructions and permanent surveillance are formidable and offer little space for democratic practice and creative sharing of knowledge. (p.9)

continues over
Yet *None but our Words* demonstrates what has been managed and offers a benchmark to which one may wish to strive. Working like this was not without its personal and professional consequences for Searle. He was dismissed from one secondary school for publishing the poems of his students that represented the harsh realities of life in working class communities. He was subsequently re-employed after marches and demonstrations were held by children and teachers to demand his reinstatement.

For Searle, Critical Literacy can only be credible if it extends and enlarges the power of language of the students that one teaches. Literacy was a tool that provides power and he was determined that his students must be given the ability to understand grammar and sentence analysis and the power to spell correctly and use punctuation effectively. Powerful forms of language needed to be learned so that the word could be used as a weapon and a tool in the struggle for liberation. Access to powerful texts and the means to produce them was central to Searle’s thinking. Like modern work (Janks, 2009) on the importance of a synthesis model of Critical Literacy he is interested in including access issues with understanding dominance, diversity and design in literacy teaching. However, unlike this model, he also adds ‘class action’ as fundamental to learning about language and its affordances.

The book carefully documents and explains the work Searle and his students did together. Searle builds upon the ‘universe’ of his students, drawing on the issues and struggles that affected them every day and turning them into schemes of work. There are chapters about the work done around these themes - local strikes, the environment, racism, international issues and so on. Using these themes he drew out poetry and prose from the children that represented their lives and that put social and class action at its forefront.

I am glad to be able to have reviewed this book as it may lead teachers and student teachers today to read about one radical approach to the teaching of literacy. It offers us all the opportunity to discuss the principles behind the practice it offers and to reflect upon our own work in schools and colleges and look beyond present day representations of literacy.

*Andrew Lambirth*

*University of Greenwich*

---

**References**