CRITICAL LITERACIES AND YOUNG LEARNERS

“Finally, a book for early childhood educators that demonstrates the wide variety of approaches to living-out critical literacy with young children—that there is not ‘one’ right way to do it—and situates the numerous classroom examples in a larger discussion of the current sociopolitical educational climate, which emphasizes testing and ‘basic literacy skills.’”

Candace R. Kuby, University of Missouri, USA

“This volume of seminal and new work in critical literacy gives readers a view of where the field has been and contains exciting new research and voices showing us where critical literacy in early childhood is headed.”

Tasha Tropp Laman, University of South Carolina, USA

Many pre-service and beginning early childhood teachers question if critical literacy is doable with young children, particularly in the current top-down educational climate which emphasizes testing and “basic literacy skills.” Critical Literacies and Young Learners shows how it is possible, even in the context of the mandates and pressures so many teachers experience, and honors the sophisticated and complex social theorists that young children are. Featuring a mix of groundbreaking work by iconic researchers and teachers, and original contributions by emerging scholars and educators in the field, the text illustrates a range of approaches to doing critical literacy with young children and, at the same time, addresses the Common Core Standards.

Part I provides several orienting frameworks on critical literacy, giving specific attention to its relationship to the Common Core Standards. Part II features chapters describing critical literacy in practice, grouped in four thematic clusters: using texts from popular culture and everyday life; focusing on issues-oriented texts and cultural identity; functional linguistic analysis of texts; interdisciplinary units of study that engage young learners in critical social action projects. Part III addresses the micro-political contexts of teaching critical literacy.

Ken Winograd is Associate Professor, College of Education, Oregon State University, USA.
CRITICAL LITERACIES AND YOUNG LEARNERS

Connecting Classroom Practice to the Common Core

Edited by Ken Winograd
For Melinda, Claire and Sam
This page intentionally left blank
CONTENTS

Preface x
Acknowledgments xiii

PART I
Overview of Critical Literacy and Common Core Standards 1

1 Critical Literacy, Common Core Standards and Young Learners: Imagining a Synthesis of Educational Approaches 3
  Ken Winograd

2 The Four Corners Not Enough: Critical Literacy, Education Reform, and the Shifting Instructional Sands of the Common Core State Standards 14
  Wayne Au and Barbara Waxman

PART II
Teachers and Young Children Doing Critical Literacy 33

A. Using Texts From Popular Culture and Everyday Life 35

3 Show Mum You Love Her: Taking a New Look at Junk Mail 37
  Jennifer O’Brien
4 Using the Everyday to Engage in Critical Literacy with Young Children

Vivian Vasquez

Extension

54

B. Focusing on Issues and Cultural Identity

5 Using Theatre of the Oppressed to Foster Critical Literacy

Carol Lloyd Rozansky, with Caroline Thorpe Santos

57

6 Talking With Trolls: A Creative and Critical Engagement with Students’ Nature-Naivety

Simon Boxley, Helen Clarke, Sharon Witt, and Victoria Dewey

70

7 Out of the Box: Critical Literacy in a First-Grade Classroom

Christine H. Leland and Jerome C. Harste, with Kimberly R. Huber

86

8 Using Read-Alouds With Critical Literacy Literature in K–3 Classrooms

Wendy B. Meller, Danielle Richardson, and J. Amos Hatch

Extension

109

C. Applying Critical Functional Linguistics

9 Teaching Social Studies and Critical Linguistics to Language Learners: Complexities, Tensions, and Opportunities

Kathryn McIntosh Ciechanowski

113

10 Critical Linguistics in the Early Years: Exploring Language Functions Through Sophisticated Picture Books and Process Drama Strategies

Beryl Exley and Karen Dooley

128

D. Engaging Young Learners in Critical Social Action Projects

11 Critical Literacy Finds a ‘Place’: Writing and Social Action in a Low-Income Australian Grade 2/3 Classroom

Barbara Comber and Pat Thomson, with Marg Wells

147
12 Exploring Child Labor With Young Students  
Kate Lyman  
Extension  

13 Developing Critical Consciousness: Children and Teachers  
Reading Wide Awake  
Patrick Shannon  

14 We Teach Who We Are: Reflections on Teaching for  
Social Justice With Young Children  
Dale Weiss  
Extension  

15 Critical Literacy and the Common Core: Resolving Tensions  
and Enhancing Student Engagement  
Ken Winograd  

Supplemental Resources: An Annotated Short List  
About the Authors  
Index
During my 23 years of teaching literacy methods to pre-service elementary teachers at Oregon State University, I have worked to embed social justice into what I teach. More specifically, while the explicit focus of my classes is methods of teaching reading, I also aim to engage students in the study and practice of literacy for equity and justice. Nonetheless, some pre-service teachers and their cooperating teachers tend to dismiss social justice teaching and critical literacy, for several reasons. First, following a traditional constructivist/Piagetian line of thinking, they argue that critical literacy is developmentally inappropriate for children who are not yet able to engage in any kind of abstract formal thinking. Second, some teachers maintain that the pressures of standards (the Common Core) and high-stakes standardized tests take priority over the critical analysis of text—there just isn’t time for critical literacy given these pressures. (Later in the book I address how critical literacy and the Common Core Standards can work together, so that there is time for both.) Third, although most cooperating teachers I have worked with express what are considered progressive beliefs about learning and curriculum, reflecting ideas such as students construct their own knowledge (Piaget), the value of group work and learning (Vygotsky), and the merits of multicultural education, there is little in most of our life histories that prepares us for an intellectual life of critique and social activism.

With the concerns of teachers who are new to critical literacy in mind, Critical Literacies and Young Learners: Connecting Classroom Practice to the Common Core does the following:

- Provides a diverse collection of stories showing young children, with the guidance of their teachers, bringing a coherent critical perspective to the analysis of text.
• Presents critical literacy as an approach to teaching that enhances student engagement.
• Shows critical literacy as an approach to teaching that helps students nurture dispositions of caring and kindness.
• Conceptualizes critical literacy as a form of inferential comprehension, which is one core comprehension strategy, or process.
• Offers clearly written descriptions of critical literacy in practice, including models of early childhood teachers who use critical literacy approaches.
• Relates each chapter’s description of critical literacy practice to the Common Core Standards, showing how teachers can both teach critical literacy and still address the Standards.

This book is designed for pre-service elementary literacy methods classes and graduate programs in early childhood literacy education, and it also is appropriate for professional book clubs. The readings are relevant for teachers of young children who are interested in forms of literacy that engage students in critical thinking. The goal of this book for you, teachers both veteran and beginner, is that it will be an experience that alerts you to other ways of knowing, to other perspectives on the teaching of reading and, more broadly, literacy and all disciplines.

Structure of the Book

Luke and Freebody (1997) remind us that critical literacy represents a ‘coalition’ of educational initiatives that envision the uses of literacy as tools for social and environmental justice, economic equality, and political engagement for all. Reflecting this ‘coalition’ of approaches, this book is intended to provide teachers with multiple entry points into the work of critical literacy.

Part I includes two overview chapters which provide several orienting frameworks on critical literacy, giving specific attention to its relationship to the Common Core Standards.

Part II comprises ten chapters describing critical literacy in practice, grouped in four thematic clusters: using texts from popular culture and everyday life; focusing on issues-oriented texts and cultural identity; applying critical linguistic analysis of texts; and critical, project-based units of study.

Part III features two chapters on the micro-political contexts of teaching critical literacy.

Part IV is the concluding section, “Bringing It All Together.”

Pedagogical Features

At the end of the chapters in Parts II and III, in the section, Connections to the Common Core, I identify particular standards from the English/Language Arts CCS that
align with the descriptions of critical literacy in each chapter. I sometimes infer standards that could reasonably be addressed, although the description of specific learning activities in the chapters may not explicitly indicate this connection. I do this since the chapters’ descriptions of critical literacy teaching sometimes are not comprehensive, and the authors have left out some details about pedagogies used. In the end, I will leave it up to the reader to assess the reasonableness of the standards that I have indicated at the end of each chapter.

At the end of each chapter, except the first and last chapters of the book, I include brief commentary where I offer some closing ideas or insights on that chapter.

Finally, at the end of each the book’s ‘parts,’ I add Extensions, where I reflect more globally on some aspect of that part of the book. The goal of this section is to raise new ideas related to the readings and, perhaps, help readers generate their own connections as well.

**Note on Abbreviation Used Throughout the Book**

CCS: Common Core Standards. Although formally designated “Common Core State Standards,” Wayne Au and Barbara Waxman remind us in Chapter 2 that the Common Core are not actually ‘state’ standards. Rather, they are national standards, which are now ready in two areas of the curriculum, in English-language arts and mathematics for grades K–12. In this book, I will refer variously to these new national standards as Common Core Standards, the Common Core and the CCS.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Naomi Silverman, my editor at Routledge. My first writing teacher taught me that nothing is written; everything is rewritten. Naomi understands this. Her care and attention to the process is a model in my own work with students.

My brothers in the early years modeled for me the art of argument, and for this I am grateful. Thanks are due to Barry Seldes at Rider University who introduced me to critical theory; to Jean Moule, who has long challenged me to reflect on unearned privilege; and Mike O’Malley, who reminds me to stay awake.

Finally, gratitude to my late parents, Pearl and Herbert Winograd, who showed me what it means to live life with integrity and care.

Credits List

Chapters 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, and 13 represent original scholarship written for this book.

Chapters 5, 14, and 15 are adaptations, with permission from previously published sources.

Chapters 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, and 12 are reprinted, with permission from previously published sources:


Adapted from Carol Lloyd Rozansky with Caroline Santos (2009). Boal’s Image Theatre Creates a Space for Critical Literacy in Third Graders. Reading Improvement, 46(3), 178–188. Used by permission of the publisher.


References

PART I

Overview of Critical Literacy and Common Core Standards
This page intentionally left blank
1

CRITICAL LITERACY, COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND YOUNG LEARNERS

Imagining a Synthesis of Educational Approaches

Ken Winograd

This chapter provides an overview of critical literacy and the Common Core Standards. My position here is that the teaching of critical literacy to young children is reasonable and, like any approach to teaching, can be framed in ways that are developmentally appropriate.

As you begin reading this book, reflect on your own beliefs about young children and the kinds of thinking they are capable of. Are young children ready for critical analysis of text and, perhaps more challenging, controversial topics? And how ready are you to teach children critical analysis, controversial subjects, and even lead social actions in the community?

Critical Literacies and Young Learners: Connecting Practice to the Common Core is a book for teachers of young children on doing critical literacy in the classroom. This book is for teachers who believe that effective reader/citizens have the skills and dispositions to question, challenge, and think deeply about all kinds of texts and all experience, in order to more effectively participate in inclusive and democratic communities. The book is also for teachers who may not be so certain about this (critical) conception of literacy but who are interested in learning more about this provocative and high-engagement approach to teaching. The readings in this book provide descriptions of teachers and students engaging in forms of critical literacy in early childhood settings, from preschool to third grade while, at the same time, attending to the Common Core Standards (CCS).

Teaching critical literacy to young children in the Age of the Common Core … Whew! In 13 words, I have convened two discourses and an audience that appear, on surface, to be incompatible and contradictory. The Common Core
can be reasonably described as a corporate model of curriculum. Critical literacy can be reasonably described as a democratizing, social justice (and anti-corporate) model of curriculum. And with our most precious audience of all, young children, most early childhood teachers and researchers agree, as I may have 15 years ago when I taught first grade, that both the CCS and critical literacy are (heads up: harsh language warning!) developmentally inappropriate!

The quintessential task for this book is to bring these three concepts in some kind of balance or alignment: How can we imagine the teaching of critical literacy with young children and also use the CCS, in part, to help organize the teaching of these skills and strategic knowledge reflected in the English Language Arts Standards? I say, imagine, since the onus is on you, the teacher, in connecting the stories and descriptions of critical literacy in this book to your own particular teaching situation. My burden, my challenge for this book, has been to provide enough thick description of teachers doing this kind of work so you can reasonably imagine and adapt what you read here.

**Defining Critical Literacy**

There are many definitions of critical literacy, and here are three that get at my meaning of this approach to literacy:

Reflecting Dewey’s (1997) vision of democracy, I would argue that within critical literacy

> [E]ach (person) has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own … equivalent to breaking down those barriers of class, race, and national territory which (has) kept men (and women) from perceiving the full import of their activity.

*(p. 87)*

Dewey’s vision of democracy (and schools) emphasizes the free flow of ideas, inclusion, the absence of exclusionary or discriminatory social structures, and the interdependent relationship between personal fulfillment and communal responsibility. Critical literacy clearly serves Dewey’s conception of democracy.

In the early 1970s, Paulo Freire (2005) had a profound effect on our thinking about literacy when he argued that literacy and power were inextricably linked: Language does shape and influence power relations in society. He maintained that reading is not at all a technical matter but, instead, is a political act in which the reader is ‘reading the world’ as well as rewriting that world.

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002, p. 382) synthesized 30 years of critical literacy research, and they formulated a four-dimensional definition: “disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical
issues and taking action and promoting social justice.” By sociopolitical issues, Lewison et al. mean that no social practices are ever neutral but, instead, these practices reflect (unequal) power relations in society which are given life, in part, by and through language.

Reflecting Dewey, Freire, and Lewison/Flint/Van Sluys, here is my working definition of critical literacy: the practice of analysis and questioning texts for their (authors’) biases, and the practice of using language to engage in civic life that has as its goal, equity and democracy. The relationship between power and language is central to critical literacy: i.e., language can be used to dominate, and language can lead to empowerment and equity. Students also engage in critical literacy when they produce texts (written, oral, artistic, digitalized, etc.) to disrupt inequitable relations and, instead, promote more equitable relations … in their schools, communities and world.

**Critical Literacy: Assumptions, Frameworks, and Approaches**

I think broadly about the meaning of texts. Texts include print like books, articles, short stories, and poems written on the papered page. Texts are also visual and oral like television and radio, paintings, cartoons, conversation, and lectures. And there are texts that dominant young people’s school experience: textbooks. As problematic as they are, textbooks are a staple, still, in US schools. Therefore, they represent another text that should be subject to critical examination by students and teachers.

A key assumption underlying critical literacy is that there are no neutral texts (Freire, 2005; Luke, 1988; McLaren, 2009). All texts reflect the biases of its authors which, in turn, reflect the authors’ social location in society. Ultimately, our biases reflect our larger beliefs, or ideologies, about the world (e.g., justice or freedom, assimilationism or cultural pluralism; meritocracy or a fair playing field for all), and they also reflect more individual, particular interests (brand of toothpaste, favorite sports, television shows, food). The critical question about bias asks the following: Does a particular bias influence good or bad outcomes, like the exclusion of certain groups of people or the pollution of the air? How might our biases result in a more equitable society or a more unequal society?

Texts can position or shape the stance of the reader, often without the reader even realizing it. Texts reflect particular ideological perspectives, even the most seemingly innocuous warning label on an aspirin bottle (Gee, 2011). Perhaps all texts are dangerous in terms of their power to position the reader, often unwittingly, to believe in or acquiesce to the position of the authors of those texts. However, if the individual reads the text with critical consciousness, with her eyes wide open, she is less susceptible to being ‘taken in’ by the text, and she is more apt to challenge the text, challenge the author, reconsider the text from her own ideological position and, even, multiple positions.
Every choice (by the author) foregrounds what was selected and hides, silences, or backgrounds what was not selected. Awareness of this prepares the reader to ask critical questions: why did the writer or speaker make these choices? Whose interests do they serve? Who is empowered or disempowered by the language used?

(Janks, 1993, p. iii)

Critical literacy provides students with the tools to be conscious of the knowledge/power relationship, and then to be skilled at raising problems and taking some action in response to this analysis. In other words, “critical literacy involves questioning received knowledge and immediate experience with the goal of challenging inequality and developing activist citizenry” (Shor, 2009, p. 290). School literacy can help students develop more critical ways of thinking and, similarly, an inclination to engage in civic life. However, if not enacted through a critical lens, school literacy can instead lead to a citizenry that is passive and unengaged. Unfortunately, literacy in general and school literacy in particular, has been used, in age after age, to solidify the social hierarchy, empower elites and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept the values, norms, and beliefs of the elites, even when it is not in their interest to do so

(Gee, 2011, p. 57)

Reflecting on Critical Literacy: Frameworks

There are several frameworks for how we might think about critical literacy. I will use these concepts, in part, to help inform my commentary on each of the chapters. I invite you to use these ideas and also your own experience as teachers to make sense of and also criticize the readings.

Four Resources

Luke and Freebody (1999), Australian literacy theorists, developed a conception of literacy in which critical literacy is just one (crucial) component. Luke and Freebody wanted to help teachers see that the teaching of traditional academic content and critical literacy can be integrated. They envisioned a broad approach to literacy teaching and learning, composed of four interrelated components that can be woven into most school-sponsored literacy activity. They term the four components resources, the kinds of literacy knowledge that readers need in order to fully make sense of text. Luke and Freebody’s model is useful as we think about the critical literacy projects in this book and their attention to all dimensions of literacy, from the critical to the basics.

The first resource is ‘breaking the code’ knowledge, the ability to ‘word call’ with fluency and to be able to comprehend at the most basic level, i.e., literal comprehension. This resource entails what can be referred to as the low-inference
knowledge of facts, procedures, and formulas. This resource, of course, is indispensable to more complex forms of literacy. There is near consensus in the reading community that this explicit literacy resource should be taught more or less systematically and explicitly, depending on the needs of learners, in the early years of schooling.

The second resource reflects a psycholinguistic approach to reading: the reader’s ability to infer meaning using background knowledge, to construct meaning from text in the ‘interaction’ of the text and the reader (with all her background knowledge, cultural lenses, geographic location, etc.). This resource was an emphasis of the whole language movement in the 1980s and 1990s, when ‘reader response theory’ (Rosenblatt, 1969) and reading as personal meaning making (Wells, 1985) dominated literacy teaching in schools in the US, Australia, and the UK.

The third resource has to do with the use of texts. When using this resource, the reader understands the relationship between the functions of language and how we shape language to reflect those functions, in school and out of school: i.e., the purposes of text “shape the way texts are structured, their tone, their degree of formality” (Luke & Freebody, 1999). When students use texts effectively, they learn/know that texts need to be crafted in a way that makes sense for particular audience and particular goals.

The fourth resource is the reader’s ability and disposition to “critically analyze and transform texts by acting on knowledge that texts are never ideologically natural or neutral” (Luke & Freebody, 1999). This is critical literacy, the critique of texts for bias as it relates to class, gender, race, age, ideology, worldview, power, everything! It has to do with the reader challenging and questioning texts and the authors of those texts, examining how the texts are shaped and how they reflect larger systems of thinking, power, and structures.

Luke and Freebody argue against the ranking of these four resources. They are all indispensable to being an effective student-reader-citizen. Ideally, the teaching of all four resources is integrated through curricular experience, although the first two resources tend to be the emphasis in most teaching. The teaching of ‘general’ knowledge (i.e., the basics, scientific concepts, core literacy skills) and critical literacy should be approached as complementary resources, as interdependent. Importantly, critical literacy (and social justice education) promotes “students’ learning of the traditional canon, but it also includes teaching pupils to think critically about and challenge the universality of that knowledge” (Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Lahann, Shakman, & Terrell, 2008, p. 635). Certainly, if we want students to learn to critique, they must have an emerging understanding of topics, content, strategies, and skills with which to critique.

**Critical Literacy as Intellectual-Analytic and Productive Processes**

Comber, Thomson and Wells (2001), whose critical literacy project is described in this book (Chapter 11), remind us that critical literacy can entail both the
intellectual critical analysis of text as well as projects that lead to more direct actions in community. In the first, the *intellectual-analytic dimension* entails students’ explicit critical analysis of text that is generated by others, like trade books, newspaper articles, videos, or commercials. The intellectual-analytic approach can entail the critical study of grammatical structures; or it can entail analysis of text at a broader conceptual level, such as a consideration of author bias, the study of stereotypes, and questions of power like ‘who has power’ and ‘who doesn’t have power.’ When students interrogate texts like this, they are “reading against the text” and “it implies that readers recognise texts as selective versions of the world; they are not subject to them and they can imagine how things can be transformed to represent a different set of interests” (Janks, 2010, p. 22).

In the second approach, which I call the *action-oriented productive dimension*, students engage in activity in which their use of language leads to some action whose goal is to effect some change, the solution to a problem in the school, community, or beyond. In the action-oriented dimension, the curriculum is initiated by the teacher’s and/or students’ response to a social problem, in their classroom, school, community, or world. In this type of critical literacy, students *create* texts through their writing, speaking, movement, and art … texts that, themselves, reflect critical consciousness. What makes students’ self-generated texts critical is their intention to speak ‘truth to power.’ Students here create texts through language, a language alive with voice, agency, and reasoned argument with the goal to influence a more equitable and inclusive world.

**Teaching Strategies and ‘Humanizing Social Structures’**

Freire’s idea of social justice (curriculum) aims to (re)establish democratic community and its multiple layers from local to global, communities characterized by equitable and egalitarian relationships between people and groups. Freire believed that humanizing social structures are those that invite, include, empower, and prepare all citizens, but especially those who have been historically excluded, to participate fully in their communities. “To be human is to engage in relationships with others and with the world” (Freire, 1974, p. 3). We *are* our brother and sister’s keeper. Freire’s ideas about ‘humanizing social structures’ should be reflected in everyday teaching and curricula.

Janks (2010) maintains that teaching methods do matter. If we aim to have students critique and use text, and learn to engage in a *humanizing* civic life, our teaching methods should be consistent with these broad goals of critical literacy and, in general, all education. High-quality teaching methods and humanizing social structures are important especially for groups that historically have been underserved by schools such as the poor, people of color, immigrants, and girls. Janks recognizes the importance of access, the idea that underserved students must have access to (and learn) dominant language forms. Importantly, these language forms should be taught with a critical perspective so students learn, for example,
how grammatical forms can reflect various meanings and biases. Janks argues for a critical multicultural curriculum with pedagogies that are varied and afford students with opportunities to learn and engage in different ways. “Diversity provides the means, the ideas, the alternative perspectives for reconstruction and transformation. But without [the use of] multi modal … media and technologies, the potential that diversity offers is not realized” (p. 26).

Harste (2011) reminds teachers to take care that all students are immersed in high-level thinking questions; learn to raise their own questions and the strategic knowledge to find the answers to these questions; engage collaboratively in authentic activity around real issues and problems; learn in and from the community; and use multiple intelligences to display knowledge (e.g., Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences). Humanizing social structures, applied to the classroom and school cultures, may include democratically governed classrooms, culturally responsive curriculum and teaching, and more ethically based approaches to ‘classroom management’ that emphasize mutual respect, care and attentiveness among teachers and students (e.g., Charney, 2002; Landau, 2003).

**Common Core**

Ironically, connecting critical literacy to the CCS is a focus of this book, but this focus isn’t visible in the chapters until afterwards, in my reflections on each chapter. This is due to the fact that most of the chapters were written prior to the CCS; still, in a few chapters, earlier iterations of the standards are used to help guide teaching and learning. At the end of each chapter, in ‘Connections to the Common Core,’ I identify standards from the English/Language Arts (ELA) that can be reasonably inferred from the various descriptions of critical literacy in the chapters.

In the next chapter, Wayne Au and Barbara Waxman do an incisive critique of the CCS, including an examination of the absence of anything critical in the standards. Briefly, I have some thoughts regarding the standards and how teachers might make sense of them in relationship to critical literacy.

The CCS consists of process understandings: metacognitive strategies for making sense of and learning from text. There are no prescriptions regarding content or topics of study. Any text can be the subject of critical analysis, whether it is text related to agricultural production, the Monarch butterfly, community roles, wetlands, weather, immigration, a study of the states or the presidents. In the teaching of comprehension, critical literacy can be understood as a form of inferential thinking. Certainly, critical literacy is a form of inferential thinking: reading between the words, between the lines, using evidence from both the text and outside the text to make and support claims, generating conclusions, making judgments about the truthfulness of texts.

The CCS sets the ratio of information text and literacy text for elementary students evenly: half of the texts used should be informational, half of the texts should
be literary. The main focus of analysis, according to the framers of the CCS, is limited to the words on the page, otherwise referred to as text-dependent, close reading. Up to 80% of the ELA standards entail this text-dependent analysis. Au and Waxman (Chapter 2) are emphatically critical of this emphasis. This apparent excessive text-dependent focus, according to Au and Waxman, marginalizes the opportunity for students to use texts to learn and make sense of their lives in community and in the world. One key assumption of critical literacy is its role in preparing students to engage fully in community around real problems that affect people’s lives. The CCS’ over-focus on text analysis independent of the moral and social dimensions of real life is one of its more serious limitations.

As a set of metacognitive processes, the CCS lack heart, a human core, values, and cultural grounding. The CCS reflect a corporate or economic agenda, by “providing benchmarks, defining knowledge and skills for entry-level to colleges and careers, and preparing students to succeed in a global economy and society” (Tatum, 2013, p. 81; also Au & Waxman, this volume). There is little in the standards that promote student engagement (Guthrie & McPeake, 2013). And there is nothing in the CCS that promote multicultural or global understandings. Tatum (2013) is especially concerned that the standards fail when it comes to “people- and humanity-centered orientations” (p. 81). These orientations entail the use of texts that are grounded in the experience of students who, historically, have been excluded from the curriculum. Tatum writes particularly about African-American boys, but his message is relevant to teachers who work with students from any historically oppressed group that may feel ‘devalued and dehumanized’ by a white-centered school system.

The use of the standards to provide some structure for teachers is not a bad idea. The ELA standards represent, in part, a reasonable set of language outcomes for students. However, no single curricular framework is complete and thorough, and the CCS is no exception. There are aspects of the CCS that are problematic and lacking, and this is the focus of Chapter 2. In the final analysis, the value of the CCS or any set of standards depends on teachers’ willingness and skill to augment and contextualize the standards with curriculum that is rich in conceptual complexity, grounded in the real lives of students, with invitations to students to do critical analysis and, then, action.

**Rethinking Developmentally Appropriate Discourse**

Why is the focal audience for this book the teachers of young children, from kindergarten to around third grade? In my experience, I have found that it is this group of educators who are most likely to dismiss critical pedagogy or social justice teaching as something that is inappropriate for young children. Teachers are reluctant to enact social justice curricula with young children for at least two reasons: children’s innocence needs to be protected from the harsh realities of life; and assumptions that children’s cognitive and emotional capacities are not suited
for more complex issues-oriented education (Kelly & Brooks, 2009). The very idea of childhood depends on the protection of children from the ‘secrets’ and realities of adulthood (Postman, 1982): e.g., death and dying, the harshness of poverty, war, and injustice. “Childhood has been romanticized by adults … and childhood ‘innocence’, a discursive construction, has been critical in justifying the way that adults have kept children separate from the public domains of active citizenry” (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006, p. 6). Instead, early childhood education is dominated by cognitive and emotional/social goals: concept development, social skills, language development, and interpersonal problem solving.

The cognitive development model of Piaget has been very influential in how early childhood educators conceptualize curricula and teaching, in which readiness to learn certain concepts and subjects is age-related. The phrase and mantra, developmentally appropriate, is a central organizing concept in the field of early childhood education, and early literacy education “has typically been dominated by developmental theory with its attendant assumptions of the naturally developing child and emergent literacy” (Comber, 2003, p. 355). The dominant view is that child is innocent, naïve, in need of protection and direction by all-knowing adults, incapable of critical analysis and activism, incapable of any social analysis, irrational and, according to Radhika Viruru, “incomplete, interesting only in what they might become and not in what they are” (Cannella, 2000, p. 218).

To its credit, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) has taken positions against the current market-driven education ‘reform’ movement to implement onerous testing regimes on preschools and kindergartens and the overemphasis on academic skills teaching for young children. NAEYC promotes linguistic diversity through bilingual education and the importance that teachers and schools are ‘culturally competent’ by actively incorporating the cultures of its students and communities in curricular experience. However, the NAEYC, in taking a ‘human relations’ and constructivist stance towards the children’s learning and development, may tend to inhibit opportunities for social justice and critical curricular experience for young children.

However, while not the dominant discourse in early childhood education, there is a tradition of antibias, multicultural and social justice curriculum and teaching, and research, with young children (Comber, 2003; Cowhey, 2003; Norton, 2011; Pelo, 2008; Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006; Vasquez, 2004). Comber (2003), in a review of critical literacy for young children, maintains that children can and do think critically about issues of fairness, equity, and power. Comber suggests that “developmentally appropriate” critical literacy work for youngers must start in the everyday experience of children, in the texts they routinely read or are read to them, and in the routine conflicts they have in the classroom or playground. Reflecting Dewey and progressive education since the early twentieth century, the task is to embed critical literacy in children’s experience, in their classrooms and communities, in effect, grounding the curriculum in the lives of students (Vasquez, 2004). The descriptions in this book of critical literacy
in practice aims to show just this, the grounding of critical literacy in children’s lived experience which, certainly from the early childhood teacher’s perspective, is truly the litmus test of ‘developmentally appropriate.’

A core assumption shared by all the readings in this book is that young children can thrive (emotionally, socially, and intellectually) in environments that engage them in real problems and issues: community problems, issues of the day (in their world), issues that matter and are consequential. Herb Kohl (1995) recognized this interest, even a yearning, by young children to be taken seriously as thoughtful and concerned members of their community.

In my experience, children quickly come to understand that critical sensibility strengthens them. It allows them to stand their ground, to develop opinions that are consistent with deeply held values, and when conscience requires it, to act against consensus or the crowd. It is a source of pleasure as well—of the joy that comes from feeling that one is living according to conviction and understanding rather than being subject to the pressures and seductions of others.

References


This chapter is a criticism of the Common Core Standards from, first, a political perspective and, second, a curricular/pedagogic perspective. Before you read this critique, reflect on your past or current experience with educational standards. Did the focus of these standards seem reasonable to you, in terms of what we want students to know and be able to do? Have you had concerns, such as ‘what is missing’ from the standards that you believe is crucial to students’ education? Thinking of the current Common Core Standards, do you know their origins, how it is they were initiated, developed and adopted by virtually all the states? How important is it that students have regular opportunities to relate their reading of text to personal experience, moral questions of right and wrong, and the political aspects of community life?

We tend to have historical amnesia when it comes to education policy in the United States. For instance, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), with resistance mounting in multiple sectors, has largely been written off as George W. Bush’s bad education law. Even Barack Obama distanced himself from NCLB and its unhealthy focus on high-stakes, standardized testing during his campaign for the presidency (Au, 2009b). This is ironic given that at the time of its passing, a broad coalition of Republicans, Democrats, Civil Rights groups, and even the teachers unions came together to pass NCLB (Karp, 2003), largely around the rhetoric of closing achievement gaps and serving underserved children of color (Darling-Hammond, 2007). The other thing we tend to forget about NCLB is that, as Thompson (2001) so poignantly reminds us, NCLB was actually the
product of the standards movement of the 1990s, which started as a push for what true-believers at the time saw as “authentic standards” at the state level that were going to raise achievement and strike a blow against educational inequality.

A decade of high-stakes, standardized testing has not raised achievement or closed gaps in test scores (Guisbond, Neill, & Schaeffer, 2012; National Research Council, 2011) and ultimately limited curriculum and instruction to the tested subjects of mathematics and literacy, and produced an increase in incremental, teacher-centered, rote instruction (Au, 2007). Low performing kids, particularly poor kids and kids of color, were having subjects like art, PE, and social studies cut out of their curriculum just to focus on test prep. Multiculturalism was also being pushed out of the curriculum (Au, 2009a). With regards to literacy specifically, a 2006 internal review by the Department of Education found that early childhood reading assessments (e.g., DIBELS) and the scripted reading programs approved for use in NCLB’s Reading First program exhibited conflicts of interest as authors of the tests and programs were also consultants to Reading First (Glenn, 2007). In addition, a large-scale 2008 nationwide study found that the program did not improve students’ overall reading comprehension (Reading First Impact Study: Interim Report, 2008).

Despite being rhetorically denounced, left behind and remembered as one of Bush’s failed policies, the legacy of NCLB in federal education policy is still alive and well today. For instance, high-stakes, standardized testing and the massive amount of data it produces remain at the center of education reform in the United States. Test scores are still used as the justification for every major education reform, including the attack on teachers’ unions, merit pay schemes, and the assault on public education generally. Indeed, a culture of testing has only become more deeply entrenched through Obama’s *Race to the Top* and the corporate education reform movement at large (Karp, 2010).

In this chapter, we examine the Common Core State Standards in light of the history of NCLB and high-stakes testing. We will conclude that the CCSS, if they come to full implementation, ultimately are leading to some form of national level high-stakes testing, and this will thus result in the same kinds of problems that arose with NCLB—particularly relative to control of both curriculum and teaching. Additionally, given the context of this book, we offer a critical reading of the implications of the *instructional shifts* reflected in those standards. We will argue that the CCSS for literacy have substantial problems, overlook some aspects of critical literacy development, and are not grounded in relevant research.

**The Common Core State Standards**

In April 2009, the National Governors Association (NGA) contracted with Achieve, Inc. (Achieve, Inc., itself was founded by the NGA in 1996 after the
standards movement fell apart) to develop national standards in reading and math (Mathis, 2010). As Mathis explains:

Achieve work groups met in private and the development work was conducted by persons who were not, with apparently only a single exception, K–12 educators. The work groups were staffed almost exclusively by employees of Achieve, testing companies (ACT and the College Board), and pro-accountability groups (e.g., America’s Choice, Student Achievement Partners, the Hoover Institute). Practitioners and subject matter experts complained that they were excluded from the development process. … A number of confidential iterations of the standards took place between the developers and state departments of education.

(2010, p. 5)

The first public draft was released on March 10, 2010, and the final recommendations version was released June 2, 2010. States wanting access to the second round of Obama’s Race to the Top monies were required to adopt the CCSS by August 2, 2010 (Mathis, 2010).

It is important to highlight two aspects of the CCSS here: First, despite being called ‘state’ standards, the CCSS are actually national standards (Mathis, 2010; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). The goal from the beginning was to develop national standards, and calling them state standards was mainly a tactic to negotiate the difficult politics of national standards, national curriculum, and national testing. Second, the CCSS are largely a top-down reform effort, where teachers were only brought on later to establish buy-in (Cody, 2009).

The buy-in for the CCSS has been substantial, too. The coalition of support for the CCSS includes business leaders and neoliberals like Bill Gates as well as some cultural conservatives like E. D. Hirsch (2013). Most of the Democratic Party, large numbers of Republicans, and both of the major teachers’ unions have also signed on their support (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012). In many ways, the coalition that has come together for the CCSS is very much like the one that came together for NCLB, with two very important missing pieces: Civil rights organizations and language related to racial achievement gaps and inequality are notably absent from the CCSS.

Essentially, the CCSS has followed a path similar to NCLB. Like the standards movement that led up to NCLB, not only did the CCSS start as state standards, but it has been as much a political maneuver as anything else—and one not based in research. Tienken (2012, p. 155) points out,

The vendors of the CCSS have a problem: They have no independently affirmed data that demonstrate the validity of the standards as a vehicle to improve economic strength, build 21st century skills, or achieve the things they claim are lacking in the current public school system.
Simply put, there is very little, if any, research evidence that increased standards correlate with increases in test scores and achievement generally (Guisbond et al., 2012; National Research Council, 2011; Weiss & Long, 2013), and a similar lack of evidence that increased test scores correlate with increased competitiveness in the global economy (Krueger, 1998; Orlich, 2004; Tienken, 2011)—two of the central presumptions undergirding the arguments for implementing the CCSS.

Another similarity between NCLB and the CCSS is in the kind of political opposition both ‘reform’ initiatives influenced. CCSS has caused a split among conservatives, who variously express fears of loss of local control, federal overreach vis-à-vis a national curriculum, fiscal efficiency, and parents’ rights, as was the case with NCLB (Apple, 2006). Right-wing extremists, mostly populist libertarians and Tea Party-styled free market nationalists like the Pioneer Institute, the American Principles Project, the Washington Policy Center, and the Goldwater Institute, have lined up against the CCSS fearing federal control and big government spending (Butcher, McGroarty, & Finne, 2012; McGroarty & Robbins, 2012), with some even referring to the CCSS as “ObamaCore” (Education Freedom Ohio, 2013). The Republican National Committee even passed a resolution in opposition to the CCSS, citing the over-standardization of the curriculum and the possibly illegal use of student data without the consent of parents (“RNC Passes Resolution,” 2013). Educational progressives, meanwhile, have cited similar concerns about the over-standardization of the curriculum, the specter of a national high-stakes test, the role that billionaire philanthropies have played in advancing the CCSS, and the top-down creation and implementation of the standards (Karp, 2013).

It is important to note that the CCSS might appear to be an improvement over what many teachers have been dealing with in many places. In some important ways the CCSS do focus on higher-order thinking skills (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). When faced with completely scripted curricula, the CCSS could feel liberating. Further, because of its lack of content prescription, anecdotal reports are that many progressive educators can find ways to do critical work within and through the CCSS (Rethinking Schools, 2013). All of which raises some interesting questions: Just because the CCSS are better than those 1990s-era standards, does that make them inherently good? Further, just what are ‘good’ standards? Is it even possible, within the context of current education reforms, to have ‘good’ standards?

CCSS in the Context of Corporate Education Reform

All education policy ultimately is defined by how it is used within particular political contexts. In the current political and policy context, the CCSS appear to be the 2.0 version of the standards movement of the 1990s and, like the last
standards movement, will likely lead to NCLB 2.0 in terms of high-stakes, standardized testing. This may sound like pure prophesizing, but we already know a few important things that have actually happened with the CCSS within the context of corporate education reform initiatives. For instance, after mapping the origins of CCSS and the relationships between those involved with its implementation, Pennington, Obenchain, Papola and Kmitta (2012) remark that:

The need to implement and assess the established CCSS situates those who created the standards as rainmakers for educational publishing companies and educational consulting non-profits they are affiliated with. The added altruistic connotations of the terms foundation and non-profit create an image of organizations aiding education similar to NGOs while they do not reveal the realities behind how the organizations are aligning themselves in ways to make substantial financial gains by making their services necessary for the CCSS.

(n.p., emphasis added)

The CCSS represent a huge financial windfall for education-related corporations. Some conservative groups like the Pioneer Institute and American Principles Project suggest a mid-range estimation that CCSS implementation will cost $15.8 billion over seven years: $1.2 billion for assessments, $5.3 billion for professional development, and $6.9 billion for tech infrastructure and support (Accountability Works, 2012). The Fordham Institute predicts the CCSS could cost $12.1 billion over the next one to three years (Murphy, Regenstein, & McNamara, 2012). The New York Times reports that venture capital investment in public education has increased 80% since 2005 to a total of $632 million as of 2012 (Rich, 2013). The development of the CCSS and the consequent rolling out of assessments, preparation materials, professional development, and other CCSS-related infrastructure fits quite well with the neoliberal project of reframing public education around the logic of capitalist market principles (Apple, 2006) as well as the transfer of a huge amount of public money into the coffers of for-profit corporations through private contracts (Burch, 2009).

The existing policy context is also causing concern among some CCSS supporters for similar reasons. Echoing Thompson’s (2001) lament from over a decade earlier, Brooks and Dietz (2012/2013) suggest that the CCSS are reasonable standards; however, they express concerns that within the current policy structures, which rely on top-down prescriptions and are connected heavily to contracts with various testing and curriculum companies, the CCSS will inevitably lead to too much standardization. Specifically, they worry that,

the Common Core State Standards Initiative goes far beyond the content of the standards themselves. The initiative conflates standards with standardization. For instance, many states are mandating that school districts select
standardized student outcome measures and teacher evaluation systems from a pre-established state list. … The initiative compartmentalizes thinking, privileges profit-making companies, narrows the creativity and professionalism of teachers, and limits meaningful student learning.

(p. 65)

Additionally, within the context of the current education reform efforts, the CCSS are being used to cover up and avoid other non-school issues like poverty, health care, etc. Again, as we heard during the 1990s and later with NCLB, we are now subjected to the same narrative from policy makers and pundits regarding stagnant test scores and our ‘failing schools’: The key to raising achievement and increasing academic competitiveness is in raising standards through the CCSS with no regard for socioeconomic factors. Adelman and Taylor (2013) point out that, besides a brief “application to students with disabilities,” the CCSS remain absolutely silent on the myriad of factors such as “restricted opportunities associated with poverty and low income, difficult family circumstances, excessive mobility, lack of English language skills, violent neighborhoods, substance abuse, inadequate health care, and lack of enrichment opportunities” (n.p.). We know that these factors impact and shape student performance, but corporate education reformers generally gloss over these in their policy initiatives (Berliner, 2013).

So far in this chapter, we have mainly highlighted ‘big picture’ historical and political issues with the CCSS. In the next section we do a close reading of the CCSS for English Language Arts (ELA) and ancillary documents while considering some big questions about critical literacy relative to the standards: Do the CCSS for ELA invite and encourage students to develop the critical literacy skills required to challenge text relative to power relations in society? Will meeting the standards lead students to engage in civic activity that challenges status quo inequalities?

**A Critical Reading of the Common Core Literacy Standards**

Taken together (standards and ancillary documents), the CCSS focus predominantly on providing students with frequent opportunities to read, write, and discuss complex text including literary nonfiction, primary source documents, and literature (Schmoker, 2011; Schmoker & Jago, 2013). Daily reading, writing, and discussion go some way towards improving education. However, these activities are not sufficient to develop critical literacy—defined as the ability to question power inequities and the status quo. Critical literacy demands that the reader connect the word to the world (Freire, 1974). Drawing on Luke and Freebody (1999), Ganji and Reilly (2013) suggest that “being code breakers, meaning makers, and text users is not enough” (p. 8) because critical literacy requires readers to also be “text critics” who are able to “critically analyze and transform texts by acting
on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral and that they represent particular points of views while silencing others and influence people’s ideas” (pp. 8–9).

In the CCSS, there are only three parts of three standards that could remotely entail elements of critical literacy. In Standard 6, students assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text. However, the ‘close reading’ discourse of the Common Core requires that reading and sense-making is to be contained, using Coleman’s oft-repeated phrase, “within the four corners” of the page (Coleman & Pimental, 2012). Therefore, this analysis is bounded by the closed world of the text, and analysis is not contextualized by larger moral or social purposes related to community life or historical events. In Standard 7, students are asked to integrate and evaluate content. However, there is precious little commentary on what is meant by ‘evaluate’ in this context. And in Standard 9, students are asked to analyze how two or more texts address similar topics and themes to build knowledge and to compare authorial approaches—but not for the purposes of ascertaining truth or wrestling with social/moral perspectives and complexities.

**Instructional Shifts**

Beyond the standards themselves it is important to closely analyze instructional shifts as articulated by the Student Achievement Partners, members of the same team that led the development of the CCSS (Achievethecore.org, 2013), to summarize the big changes that the CCSS proposes. These instructional shifts do the work of promoting what is new and different and ‘better’ about the standards compared to older iterations of standards from across the states. Given the lengthy, atomized, and skill-based nature of the NCLB-era standards, the new CCSS ELA (aka, instructional shifts) have been advertised as a more manageable set of aims. The shifts make explicit the assumptions behind the standards and the ‘straw men’ the authors are arguing against. A close reading of these shifts exposes implicit arguments concealed in the standards about how students learn literacy.

**Shift #1: Building Knowledge Through Content-Rich Nonfiction**

The first instructional shift in the CCSS ELA emphasizes the essential role of building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction. For K–5, this means that 50% of students’ reading should come from informational text, and for secondary, 70%. In middle and high school, students are expected to build knowledge in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects through reading and writing while secondary ELA classes are exhorted to also include literacy nonfiction (Achievethecore.org, 2013).
This shift signals the big change that content knowledge is now important, a potentially useful corrective to the sadly content-free NCLB years which focused relentlessly on developing foundational reading skills, a focus that was particularly problematic in high poverty elementary schools (Allington, 2012). Not teaching content (e.g., social studies, science, and the arts) was self-defeating in the extreme, as it has long been established that background knowledge is a primary determinant of reading comprehension (Marzano, 2004; Willingham, 2009).

However, the first big assumption in the CCSS is that students build knowledge exclusively through reading and writing. The implicit epistemological stance here is either that children learn solely through text or that learning through text should be privileged to the exclusion of other ways of learning. In an inversion of Paulo Freire (1974), this would have students reading only the word with little or no attention paid to reading the world. Do students not also learn through their interactions with and the exercise of their own imaginative engagement in the world? In terms of child development, it has long been established that young children learn by interacting with the world—objects, other children, and adults (see Piaget, Dewey, Elkind). Ironically, what the standards never mention is that highly effective ways to foster literacy skills and foundational background knowledge are through play and real world experiences. The benefits of play are legion: play primes the mind for social imagination and empathy, fosters social skills (negotiation and cooperation), reduces stress, and builds resilience (Miller & Almon, 2009). As Peter Johnston (2012) suggests, social imagination may pave the way for understanding character motivation and character development, important skills featured in the CCSS Reading Standards (Standard 3). Curriculum units that invite close observation and interaction with the natural and social world stimulate wonder and curiosity, foster play and social interaction, build background knowledge, and motivate literacy (Owocki & Goodman, 2011).

The second assumption is that students build knowledge primarily through nonfiction text, and therefore the justified emphasis—and percentages—of nonfiction vs. fiction in the standards. As Bomer and Maloch (2011) assert, the CCSS authors cite no evidence to support their claims that informational text best develops conceptual and factual knowledge. Again, this shift implies an epistemological stance about how we learn: That we don’t learn facts/content from fiction and, even more perniciously, that facts/content are the most important things to learn. This is an assumption that has aroused the ire of many English teachers, and posts on the relative merits of fiction vs. nonfiction have lit up the blogosphere. One danger of the time demands of focusing heavily on informational text is that multicultural literature, which is most often in the fiction category, will be given short shrift (Short, 2013). And while literary nonfiction may well be a useful addition to a literary diet, it is fiction that invites imaginative engagement on a regular basis. As Stephen Greenblatt, author of The Swerve: How the World Became Modern contends, “Literature is the most astonishing technological means humans have created to capture experience” (quoted...
If learning happens best with emotion (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999), then literature is the perfect medium to imaginatively engage students in the moral dilemmas, ambiguities, and complexities of life. It is moral imagination and engagement that leads students to question, to care, and to act.

**Shift #2: Reading, Writing, and Speaking Grounded in Evidence From Text, Both Literary and Informational**

This second shift refers to the close reading advocated throughout the Reading Standards and how questions and answers about texts read should be **text-dependent**. Thinking, reading, and writing are confined to the “four corners.” Examine what Coleman and Pimental (2012), primary authors of the standards, say in their *Revised Publishers’ Criteria* for the CCSS: “Text dependent questions do not require information or evidence from outside the text or texts; they establish what follows and what does not follow from the text itself” (p. 6). Thus, this shift involves having students answer text-dependent questions that require careful attention to the text, as opposed to pedagogies that have students draw on prior knowledge or experience or to big questions about essential themes.

Close reading is a wonderful skill. Noticing and observing a text, rereading, paying careful attention to how an author structures a text, can reveal much. Noticing is also something anyone can do; it can be a profitable way into a text as everyone can contribute to a discussion of what they notice when exploring a text (Duckworth, 2012). Thus, close reading is indeed a valuable tool for making sense of a text’s multiple meanings and *how* the text makes those meanings available. But close reading is one strategy among many. So the questions are: Why does the CCSS privilege this particular strategy and make it the lynchpin of the ELA standards? Why limit all discussion about a text to that particular text? Why limit questions to the text-dependent questions that the teacher (or curriculum developer) devises? By sticking to the four corners of the text, students are also inhibited from formulating their own perspective or making the rich connections that lead to genuine insight. Students are not engaging in critical literacy if they are not invited to pose their own questions, to wonder about the text and the author’s assumptions, and to wander outside of the text to the larger framework of society.

In arguing for the CCSS, the standards’ framers have argued against a reading strategy popularized over the last 15 years: activating prior knowledge through text-to-self connections. Their arguments, however, are largely based on a zealous and poorly understood use of this reading strategy, which often resulted in a vacuous misuse of text-to-self connections (e.g., ‘I have a dog! I went on vacation once!’). However, we know from long experience that any instructional practice can be used in concrete, reified ways without thoughtful or educative outcomes. Debbie Miller (2013) and Ellin Keene (2008) point out intelligent remedies for
pointless connections that take the reader out of the text: model connections that take students deeper into the text and articulate how those connections lead to deeper understandings of the text and themselves. These kinds of connections help young readers develop their capacity to make deep and generative connections. Having students discuss connections opens up a world of fruitful collaborative discussion where peers learn from each other as well as about one another.

The overemphasis on text-dependent questions and questions that reference only the Reading Standards lead the Appendix B authors to offer this example of a way to address Standard #9: “Compare the coming of age theme in Bud Not Buddy [Curtis, 2004] and The Birchbark House.” However, consider that Louise Erdrich (1999) wrote The Birchbark House, an insider look at the life of an Ojibwa girl living on an island in Lake Superior in 1847, as a compelling alternative (antidote) to the racist comments and perspectives in the Little House on the Prairie series (Laura Ingalls Wilder). Comparing The Birchbark House and Little House on the Prairie would lead students into a rigorous and stimulating discussion of perspective, history and racism. The point here is that such fruitful comparisons are unlikely to become part of the curriculum because attention to larger social issues are not part of the CCSS, and teachers are being told to confines inquiry to text-dependent questions.

The Issue of Scaffolding

Another aspect of this second shift is the admonition to not waste time building background knowledge, using pre-reading activities, or previewing text (Achievethecore.org, 2013). However, doing nothing but close readings of unfamiliar text, while an interesting exercise on occasion, would be a lot like the dilemma faced by the little boy in the recent novel, Room (Donoghue, 2010), whose whole world is contained in the one-room house where he’s been restricted his whole life. The boy is unable to make sense of many things he hears about because he never had the opportunity to develop the larger frame of reference that develops from actual experience in the big world. We all bring our prior knowledge with us wherever we go, because there’s no other way for us to encounter text and grow from it (Pearson, 2013).

Making sense while reading has long been understood to be an interplay of the text and a person’s wealth of experiences in the world, of other texts, and knowledge of literary form (Rosenblatt, 1995). The CCSS dispenses with all that and advises to just stick close to the text. This stance was later revised somewhat by the authors when they suggested that texts could be read within the context of social studies or science units. Contrast what it might be like to read a complex text closely in the context of a unit where schema is built, refined, and revised over time, and multiple perspectives are considered, versus decontextualized close readings. It is in the former experience that students have the best opportunity to interrogate texts, to question the author, to adopt a stance.
According to video presentations by David Coleman, chief architect of the Standards, all that is needed for comprehension is to plunge into the text at hand and to reread as many times as possible until the text is understood. However, to demonstrate the limitations of close reading without background knowledge, examine this passage taken from President Obama’s 2013 inauguration speech:

We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall.

(Obama & Favreau, 2013)

First, notice the echoes of the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation. Second, notice the syllogism about equality that echoes the one Daniel Day Lewis articulated in the movie *Lincoln* (also note that Obama had Steven Spielberg the director and Tony Kushner the screenwriter over for dinner in the month preceding the inauguration)—again, this is a connection that is outside of the text, but one that also resonates. Third, on a close reading you might notice that Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall all start with S (alliteration); you might notice that they are all place names, and, you might infer that these places must be special since they are named and singled out. But, without background knowledge, you wouldn’t know that Seneca Falls was the site of the first women’s rights convention, that Selma was an important site in the civil rights movement, and that Stonewall is the name of the bar in Greenwich Village where a police raid signaled the start of the gay liberation movement. Without understanding the significance of Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall, how could the reader possibly get the import of this eloquent passage?

Background knowledge makes close reading possible. While it may be that there has been widespread overuse of scaffolding and, at times, inane text-to-self connections, throwing out the baby (building adequate background knowledge) with the bathwater unfairly advantages those who come in to the classroom with extensive prior knowledge, dispenses with strategies for fostering curiosity, and ignores the need to level the playing field by ensuring that everyone has the requisite background information. The point here is not that close reading has no value in the teaching of reading. The point is this: In the absence of scaffolding to help students develop their background knowledge, how will all readers (listeners) have access to the meaning, import, and soaring use of rhetoric that may well inspire one to rise up against injustice?

**Shift #3: Regular Practice With Complex Text and Its Academic Language**

Appendix A of the CCSS spends 16 pages detailing the argument for text complexity. Again, the purpose for the staircase of complexity throughout the school
years is to ready students for college and career-level reading. The evidence cited to support this promotion of text complexity stems from research conducted by ACT and the College Board; no other independent research is cited, and note that David Coleman is now head of the College Board. However, there is precious little in this appendix about how to scaffold so that children can read at greater levels of complexity or any research to show that reading at levels beyond what one is capable of helps one grow as a reader. The straw man here is the current practice of using ‘just right’ text, based on the idea that students develop reading skills through prolific reading of texts that they can read at 98% accuracy. The appendix does not cite any research that Allington (2012) and others have done over the last 30 years on the value of reading volume (i.e., the amount of reading done by the student), which provides convincing evidence that one overarching strategy to help develop readers is simply to let them read. Indeed, a study by Ivey and Johnston (2013) found huge achievement gains for eighth graders when they were given the choice to read edgy adolescent literature (which they did).

Determining text complexity is, itself, problematic. While the appendix discusses quantitative measures at length, and qualitative measures to some extent, it is in the area of reader–task components that the appendix falls short. The student’s motivation, interest, and background knowledge and the teaching conditions—how the text is introduced, motivated and taught—play critical roles in determining whether a text can be comprehended and whether a student is willing to struggle with a text (Hiebert, 2013; Snow, 2013).

Indeed, there is precious little in this appendix about how to scaffold so that children can read at greater levels of complexity or any research to show that reading at levels beyond what one is capable of helps one grow as a reader and develop stamina. In the CCSS vision, students are to do what Snow (2013) refers to as “cold” close readings (Shift #2) of difficult material (Shift #3). This is worrisome, because it may well lead to a collapse of motivation (Snow, 2013) and not college and career readiness.

**Shifting Questions**

A close look at all three shifts yields a general set of concerns and questions:

- Where do students get to talk about how their reading has changed them? (see Tovani, 2011).
- Where do students get to talk about what they will do as a result of their reading?
- How will we help students connect and find access to complex texts that they may feel have nothing to offer them, and to stimulate the curiosity to dig into texts and do close readings?
- How will students come to understand the perspective of an author or a character unless they also compare to their own perspectives?
• How can teachers avoid a preponderance of low-level, literal text-dependent questions (Pearson, 2013), especially as these will dominate new CCSS-based curricular resources?

• How will we avoid literal comprehension being seen as a prerequisite to interpretive or critical comprehension? Often, it’s the higher-level questions that stimulate a need to read closely, e.g., comparing and contrasting two works as opposed to having students read each one closely and then compare (Pearson, 2013).

• How will teachers get to know students better and honor what each student brings to the table, and how will students get to know each other if there are not constant invitations to share funds of knowledge, perspectives, histories?

• How will teachers foster student engagement with books and student choice?

(Allington, 2012; Ivey & Johnston, 2013)

Note that in our close reading of the standards and supplementary material, it has been impossible to hew completely to the “four corners” of the text. It’s not permissible in academic writing to even do so. More importantly, we cannot, as humans, not bring to bear what we understand and believe and value on what we read. Teaching students how to do that responsibly is the essence of teaching critical literacy; teaching students to amputate their histories and consciousness as they read, is not.

Conclusion—The Great Speckled Bird

Teachers will need to exercise their own critical literacy capabilities as they interrogate the anchor standards, the grade progressions and the inevitable published curriculum materials that will loudly trumpet their alignment with the standards. The task for teachers will be to know and be articulate about how deep meaning occurs; how all readers bring their prior knowledge to a text and build on that knowledge throughout a reading and across texts; how the sharing that comes from reading provocative texts can build a classroom culture that binds students together and inspires them to act.

It’s not just what’s on the page of the Anchor Standards or even the rather arbitrary learning progressions cobbled together by committee that comprise the K–12 Standards that are the big issues. Instead, the quintessential issues are how the Standards will be used, interpreted, reified, commercialized, marketed, and, of course, assessed. At each stage of implementation, caveat emptor. It will fall to the lot of teachers to interrogate and resist. One of the best ways for educators to resist is to engage in critical literacy themselves and to invoke their own stores of experiential evidence about what works to critically engage and motivate readers.

Forty years of research into how we construct meaning provides some helpful
direction: choose moving text; connect text to students’ lives and to issues in society; build background knowledge to provide access; stimulate curiosity and the ‘need to know’; and foster the exquisite pleasure that comes from well-written words. In the inspiring words of Patrick Finn (1999), make literacy dangerous.

There is one hopeful note in the CCSS pursuit of engaging students with literary text, fiction, or informational: No one can dictate what goes on between a student and a text and great literature has a way of being sublimely subversive. As Reading Lolita in Tehran (Nafisi, 2003) (literary nonfiction) and Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (Sijie, 2001) (literature) show, amazing things can happen when students and texts talk to each other, whether it’s in a clandestine setting, the private world of the imagination, or a classroom. We worry, however, that an overly zealous or concrete interpretation of the standards and the shifts will lead to yet another round of poor practice: children being required to exhaustively and closely read nonfiction texts, answer text-dependent questions, and keep at bay any potential for imaginative engagement with the world and its issues.

Given the history of standards reform efforts in the United States, the coalition driving the CCSS initiative, the support they have lined up for the Standards, and the trajectory of the CCSS within the context of corporate education reform, all evidence points to the creation of a national high-stakes test based on the CCSS. When this happens, the data-heads will finally have a metric to easily compare all states, schools, districts, administrators, teachers, students, etc., regardless of any concerns about the accuracy, validity, or reliability of the assessment (Au, 2009c). This will be the case regardless of the contradictions posed by the CCSS tests: Consider the inherent mismatches in using computer adaptive assessments to assess some of the Reading Standards. For example, Reading Standards 2 and 3 ask that students “determine central ideas or theme of a text and analyze their development” and to “analyze how and why individuals, events or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.” How will students be able to demonstrate these skills with short texts as opposed to doing so with novels and longer works, as surely the CCSS authors intended for those standards?

We are currently in the honeymoon period with the CCSS. The standards are mostly here, but the tests are mostly not, and for now many are impressed with how much curricular freedom the CCSS seems to give them (Rethinking Schools, 2013). When the tests come in full force beginning in the 2014–15 school year, on computers with automated programs scoring even the essays (Farley, 2012), such curricular freedom and attention to process over product will evaporate. Not only has the historic role of standards development led to such testing, but, more importantly, despite any high minded claims to caring about learning, high-stakes, standardized testing is all that the education reformers behind the CCSS have to offer. When it comes to assessment, their vision is so limited by ideology that they can’t envision anything else. And we’ll pay the price in the loss of critical literacy.
COMMENTARY

There is much to concern us about the Common Core. The Standards reflect the needs of the economy and workplace readiness for our students. There is nothing in the Standards that addresses multiculturalism, critical literacy, and student engagement. The implementation of the Standards has become utterly commercialized, and there are large companies that are heavily invested in the Standards and their institutionalization in US education. The English Language Standards, themselves, are reasonable but limited. Without teachers who have the autonomy and will to teach beyond these standards, its text-dependent focus inhibits our students and teachers from more fully relating text to its moral, cultural and social dimensions.

The core premise of this book is that the purpose of public education is to prepare students to be caring and engaged citizens in a democracy. The preparation of students for citizenship in a democracy depends on their ability to analyze texts fully and in context of their lived experience, in effect reading both ‘the word and the world’ in all its moral, cultural, or political dimensions. Of course, students benefit from text-dependent analysis, and this should be one focus of text comprehension. Wayne and Barbara are simply advocating for balance, so students learn to construct meaning both in the text alone and in relation to the larger world. It is for this reason that I recommend that teachers take the Standards seriously, teach them well, but find balance between these two approaches to comprehension. Certainly, I hope that teachers embed the teaching of the CCSS in a larger curricular framework of critical literacy and social justice education. But at the same time, it is important that teachers organize and do the political work to revise and improve the Standards, reflecting the concerns of Wayne and Barbara.

References


Karp, S. (2013). *The trouble with the Common Core*. Paper presented on September 21, at the Lewis & Clark Center for Community Engagement; Oregon Writing Project, Lewis and Clark College, Portland, OR.


PART II

Teachers and Young Children Doing Critical Literacy
This page intentionally left blank
PART IIA

Using Texts From Popular Culture and Everyday Life
This page intentionally left blank
SHOW MUM YOU LOVE HER

Taking a New Look at Junk Mail

Jennifer O’Brien

This is a ground-breaking study of young children engaging in critical analysis of Mother’s Day catalogues, first published in 1994. This is a sensible approach to critical literacy, especially with young children, by basically asking children to use their considerable sense-making skills with the quintessential prompt: Does this text make sense? Does this text reflect your personal experience, or not? What else would make sense? In effect, critical literacy invites students to challenge text, all kinds of text, and in this chapter … everyday texts. As you read this piece, I invite you to reflect on the developmental appropriateness of Jennifer’s questions, prompts and, overall, her use of Mother’s Day catalogues as the focus of analysis with 5–7-year-olds.

Pink and Gold ...

A jeweller’s catalogue sits in front of me as I write. It came through my letterbox on April 19th. The cover shows a full colour photograph of a gold watch, a deep red jewellery box, a gold pen, a pink bow and a card reading, To Mum With Love. Mother’s Day is on May 9th. There’s clearly plenty of time for families to mull over the gift suggestions and decide how they’ll reward Mum this year.

Last year, as the avalanche of Mother’s Day catalogues poured into my letterbox and tumbled out of newspapers, I decided that they were an everyday text crying out to be approached from a new perspective. I wanted to offer my 5–7-year-old students a different way of looking at a ritual as taken-for-granted as Mother’s Day and the advertising material that accompanies it.
In this chapter, I want to show how I have taken up some of the specific insights of researchers and theorists to make changes to the reading and writing in my classroom. I want to show how the conversations I have with my students and the activities that I design around texts are framed with a different, critical edge. I want to bring together three key notions concerning literacy. First, it is important for students to learn to analyze their texts; second, children need to learn ways of dealing with texts from the world outside school; and third, teachers need to show their students possibilities for looking closely at texts that are normally taken-for-granted. In short, it is crucial for students and teachers together to add to the ways in which they presently deal with texts.

**Analytical Readers ...**

Freebody and Luke (1990) argue that successful readers in our society operate in four different ways. They “break the code” so they can read the words on the page; they read to make sense of the text; they read to make use of the text, perhaps as a source of information; and they analyze or ask questions of the text.

Baker and Freebody (1989) also make a strong case for extending the roles that young students take on as readers; in addition to operating as hearers of stories, they can explore with their teacher ways of analyzing texts (p. 197).

It is this analytical role that my students and I are exploring in my classroom; my aim is to offer my students opportunities to ask questions about the messages they receive in things they read.

**Everyday Texts ...**

Baker and Freebody (1989) maintain that literacy instruction in the early years of schooling does more than teach children to read and write; it plays a critical role in introducing them to a version of literacy referred to by these researchers as “school-literacy” (p. xix). They point out that the reading usually practiced at school, involving literature and books written for use in the classroom, is a very specific literacy which fails to take account of the many texts students come across in everyday life. Teachers need, therefore, to introduce to our students ways of tackling the myriad texts that fill the world outside school.

As I shall show in this chapter, I have taken up this recommendation that reading lessons could include out-of-school texts. I have framed the Mother’s Day catalogue activities so that my students have opportunities to deal with a range of questions regarding text functions, the interests of the writers and the construction of the reader (Baker & Freebody, 1989).

Finally, Lankshear’s (1989) arguments for a “proper literacy” for young students have a strong impact on my own classroom practice, encouraging me to draw a conclusion that it is crucial that students acquire, share, and consider their own knowledge.
Questioning Commonsense Understandings ...

Freebody and Luke (1990) argue that an important component of being a successful reader is learning to question the commonsense understandings that allow us to take for granted texts and the way they represent the world. In the classroom, our conversations, questions, and tasks are framed critically so that my students and I can explore texts in this new way.

I decided to take up the challenge of opening up to my students’ inspection the whole subject of something as “natural” and unquestioned in Mother’s Day.

I Want to Give You a Chance to Think in New Ways About Mother’s Day Catalogues … What Happened

My overall aim was to set tasks that would give students a chance to think about the version of reality constructed by the text and to think about different possibilities for constructing reality. In other words, to consider the broad question, What sort of world is constructed in and by this text; what other possible worlds could have been constructed?

The Process

- We started with piles of catalogues on the students’ tables. Younger and older children sat together, as they usually did, so they could work together.
- Each section of this activity consisted of a half page giving each student a space to draw and label in response to each critically-framed activity.
- Before students tackled each section, we talked about what I was asking them to think about and to do, and my reasons for designing the activity.
- After each page had been completed, we talked over what they had drawn and written and their reasons for what they had chosen.
- At the end, everyone had a set of half pages which we stapled into booklets.

Page by Page ...

- Page 1: Before you look inside these catalogues, draw and label 6 presents for mothers you expect to see in Mother’s Day catalogues.

My aim here was to find a way to bring students’ **commonsense knowledge** to the fore so it could be examined.

- Page 2: Draw and label some presents you wouldn’t expect to find in Mother’s Day catalogues.

Here, I made it possible for students to **examine their commonsense knowledge** through the process of putting what was expected and what was not expected side by side.
Page 3: Look through the catalogues. Draw and label 6 kinds of presents you can find in Mother’s Day catalogues. Children now looked at the world as represented in the catalogues.

- Page 4: What groups of people get the most out of Mother’s Day?

I made it possible to examine reality by asking the critically framed question rarely asked at this level. I have interrupted the taken for granted and opened up a way to start to look differently at a largely unexamined aspect of the world outside school.

- Page 5: Draw and label any presents you were surprised to find.

Here I was looking to jolt students’ commonsense view of the way things are, to disrupt their expectations.

- Page 6: Make two lists: How the mothers in the catalogues are like real mothers … How the mothers in the catalogues aren’t like real mothers.

Children were able to consider contradictions with the world of their own experience.

- Page 8: Make a new Mother’s Day catalogue full of fun things instead of clothes and things for the house.

This activity made it possible to consider other ways in which mothers could be represented apart from the pretty in pink/utilitarian image in most of the catalogues.

Reflecting on What Happened

A Positive View

All students, including the youngest, were able to respond at a level appropriate to their age and ability as a consequence of my framing of instruction (Draw and label), the whole-class talk throughout the entire episode, and the mixed-age seating arrangements.

In a number of ways, this activity made space for my students to engage in the range of successful reading roles (Freebody & Luke, 1990) and to share and consider their own knowledge. They were able to identity and represent their own view of the world; to accept the challenge of comparing their view of the world and the view presented in the catalogues; and to imagine and represent a different reality from that of their experience and that of the text.

I was pleased because while they were having fun, class members were engaged in talking about issues, such as who benefits from the commercialization of Mother’s Day and the representation of mothers in junk mail. The episode offered
my students a chance to develop critical understandings of their world; to examine the catalogues’ claim to be a ‘natural’ part of their everyday world.

**Making Changes**

Aware of the limitations of activities which view critically only the visual representation of society, I have designed the following activities to offer older school students and adults opportunities to take a critical look at a largely unexamined part of their world. I have drawn their attention to the way language is used to construct reality, and to the critical issue of the positioning of readers in and by texts. In addition, I have framed the tasks around written rather than pictured responses.

**Make lists** of the following:

- The words that are used about mothers.
- The words that are placed near the word, “mother.”
- The sorts of shops that publish catalogues.

**Put these people:**
mothers … fathers … children … grandmothers … grandfathers … aunts … uncles … friends … **into groups** under these headings:

- MEANT TO BE READERS OF MOTHERS’ DAY CATALOGUES
- PROBABLY NOT MEANT TO BE READERS OF MOTHERS’ DAY CATALOGUES

**Talk about** the decisions you’ve made.

**Talk about** these questions:

- What do the women like who get these presents?
- What do they do?
- What are they interested in?
- If you only knew about mothers from these catalogues, what would you be able to say about them?

**Look at the list** of group of people who have something to do with Mother’s Day:

- Mothers
- Fathers
- Children
- Shopkeepers

**Write down** what you think are the good things about Mother’s Day and the not-so-good things for the people in each group.
Make lists of

- The words the writer uses to make you want to buy these things
- Words the writer *wouldn’t* have used with these pictures.
- The words the writer uses most. What message does this give you?

**CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMON CORE**

Jennifer’s unit was taught with five 7-year-olds in a non-graded classroom which, in the United States, approximates kindergarten to second grade. For this reason, I use the second grade English Language Arts Standards for reading and writing to make connections to the Common Core. I have one caveat about the use of the standards with this chapter. First, the standards are weak when it comes to visual literacy, like the analysis of commercial text, photos, paintings, etc. Still, the “reading” of visual text, from a critical literacy perspective, entails fundamentally the same processes as when the text is traditional prose. The use of visual text for critical analysis represents an important contribution of this chapter.

Student Learning Activities: observed/‘read’ Mother’s Day catalogues, and drew and wrote about what is contained and not contained in these catalogues; discussed the goals and contradictions of the commercialization of Mother’s Day (i.e., what is good and not good about Mother’s Day, from perspective of mothers, fathers, children, shopkeepers); compared/contrasted mothers/gifts represented in the catalogues with the students’ experience of ‘real’ mothers/gifts.

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.2.1** Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.2.9** Identify the main purpose of a text, including what the author wants to answer, explain, or describe.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.2.6** Identify the main purpose of a text, including what the author wants to answer, explain, or describe.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.1** Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply reasons that support the opinion, use linking words (e.g., because, and, also) to connect opinion and reasons, and provide a concluding statement or section.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.2** Write informative/explanatory texts in which they introduce a topic, use facts and definitions to develop points, and provide a concluding statement or section.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.5** With guidance and support from adults and peers, focus on a topic and strengthen writing as needed by revising and editing.
COMMENTARY

It is interesting to notice how the questions asked by Jennifer are quite matter-of-fact and, at the same time, provocative core prompts when doing critical literacy. The beauty of using everyday text, for critical text analysis, is that it is so familiar and commonsensical to students. Thus, the tacit knowledge that young students bring to the criticism of these texts really enhances their engagement in this close reading and analysis.

Advertisers are extremely skilled in shaping the feelings and behavior of citizen/consumers, and children are especially vulnerable to the clever and seductive images, text and music of commercials. Teaching young children to do critical analysis of advertising is crucial, especially as our world has become more market-driven, and consumerism has infiltrated our collective conception of what it means to be a good citizen. No doubt, everyday text as a focus for student inquiry is compelling, both to enhance engagement and also to prepare educated citizens.

References


USING THE EVERYDAY TO ENGAGE IN CRITICAL LITERACY WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Vivian Vasquez

In the analysis of text on a candy fruit package, Vivian prompts 3–5-year-old students with simple but deceptively powerful questions: What do you notice about these wrappers? What do you like and dislike about them? How would you redesign these? How do these texts influence how you feel? In this critical literacy mini-unit, you might notice how Vivian, ever-aware of the age of her co-participants, blends playful and imaginative/game-like activities with more ‘mature’ prompts. Do the students surprise you, regarding the quality of their analysis and action?

It has been over 14 years since I have been exploring what critical literacy could mean in different settings (Albright et al., 1999; Vasquez, 2003b, 2001a, 2001c, 2000a, 2000b, 1994). In particular, my work has focused on young children primarily between age 3 and 8 (Vasquez, 2003a, 2003b, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2000a, 2000b). Of the work I have done, especially with pre-school aged children, a consistent question asked of me has been, “Do young kids really talk about social issues or equity issues?” and “Why can’t we just let them be kids?” This is often followed with “Pre-schoolers don’t really talk like that, do they?” (meaning as critical participants and analysts). My experience in working with young children has proven time and time again that children are in fact very capable and willing to participate in hard conversations that are meaningful to them and that impact their lives. Sometimes it is adults that have difficulty with this, often due to a feeling of uncertainty regarding how to talk about difficult topics or issues with children. When this happens the literacies with which they can participate in the world are ‘bound’ since children are only able to speak using the discourses that
have been made available to them or for which they have had access. This implies that part of schooling, therefore, needs to be about making accessible dominant and powerful discursive practices that create spaces for young learners to participate differently in the world.

It’s a hard time to be a kid these days. Day in and day out children take in multi-modal bits of information consisting of words and images that sometimes conflict and at other times are complementary. Often, this textual information works to position them in ways that offer up ideals for who they can and cannot be in the world today, who they should and should not be as well as what they should and should not do or think. Given this complex world, we cannot afford for children not to engage in some tough conversations if they are to learn to become critical analysts of the world who are able to make informed decisions as they engage with the world around them.

... I show and tell some of the ways that a group of pre-school students and I used everyday public and social texts as sites for taking up social issues from a critical literacy perspective. It was created during a research study I did with a group of pre-school students between ages 3 and 5. In this chapter, however, I focus my attention on a focal group of five children. There were two girls and three boys in the group. The pre-school was located in a highly multicultural, middle to low-income community in a suburb of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Many of the children at the school received government subsidies. Having worked as a consultant in the school, I was given permission to work independently with the group of five children.

The study ... was on analyzing everyday text as one way to make visible the power of taking up such texts as tools for understanding how language works and the importance of practicing the use of language in powerful ways to get things done in the world (Comber, 2001)....

First, I will make clear what I mean when I use the terms critical literacy and everyday texts. Following this, I will walk you through some deconstructive and reconstructive work with the group of five preschoolers as we engaged in critical literacies. You’ll hear about what Hilary Janks (2002) refers to as motivations and methods for doing this work and learn about the differences that access to critical discourses can have in various settings.

**Defining Critical Literacy**

From the start, I have believed that

A critical literacy curriculum needs to be lived. It arises from the social and political conditions that unfold in communities in which we live. As such it cannot be traditionally taught. In other words, as teachers we need to incorporate a critical perspective into our everyday lives with our students in order to find ways to help children understand the social and political issues around them.

*(Vasquez, 2003b)*
Comber (2001) describes critical literacies as involving people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice. She continues by saying

this sounds grand, but often—perhaps usually—critical literacies are negotiated in the more mundane and ordinary aspects of daily life. Critical literacies include an ongoing analysis of textual practices: How do particular texts work? What effects do they have? Who has produced the text, under what circumstances, and for which readers? What’s missing from this account? How could it be told differently?

(Comber, 2001, p. 1)

My experience working with teachers attempting to engage in critical literacy shows me that in many cases social issues are treated as variables to be added to the existing curriculum. This, rather than using these issues to build curriculum, is done often because the topics are associated with cynicism and un-pleasantable work or because these topics are relegated as part of non-formal schooling, thereby positioning this critical work outside of school discursive practices. However, critical literacy does not necessarily involve taking a negative stance; rather, it includes looking at an issue or topic in different ways, analyzing it and hopefully being able to suggest possibilities for change or improvement.

It involves beginning from the notion that texts are never neutral and that they are written from particular perspectives, stances, or vantage points and that these carry with them particular ideologies. As such, texts work to position readers in particular ways. At the same time, however, we as readers take in texts from particular perspectives, stances, and vantage points, and as Hilary Janks and Roz Ivanic (1992) suggest, children need to understand that they can contribute either to reproducing or reshaping existing asymmetrical social relations where there are top dogs and underdogs.

Often, issues of social justice and equity seem to be looked upon as heavily-handed issues.

The discussions I have had with my students and the children who have participated in my research, the actions we took, and the work we accomplished, although often serious, were very pleasurable. We enjoyed our work because the topics that we dealt with were socially significant to us.

**Everyday Texts: What Are They?**

When I use the term everyday texts, I am referring to texts that are spoken or written as part of everyday life. These texts can be so common that we do not carefully take notice of them. As a result, we can be less aware of the kinds of messages about our world which they convey. Since these texts are not natural representations of the world, they can be interrogated, deconstructed, and
analyzed to uncover different views of the world they could represent. In doing so, we are able to make visible the lifestyles and social identities that are constructed through what is presented and how it is presented creating space for the redesign of such texts.

**A Look at Early Critical Literacy Practices Using Snack Packages From Popular Foods for Children**

**Unpacking Fruity Peel-Outs**

The work described in this section of the chapter deals with the deconstruction and re-design of a Fruity Peel-Outs box. Fruity Peel-Outs are candy fruit snacks for children. Sheets of sweet, sticky, pliable candy come rolled up in individual packages ready for children’s consumption. On the first day of the study, one of the focal pre-schoolers happened to bring a box of these candies to school. The Fruity Peel-Outs box brought immediate interest to others in the group as they began calling out things they noticed on it. Capitalizing on this interest and recalling the work done by Comber and Simpson (1995) on analyzing cereal boxes, I asked them to pass the box around and had each child name one thing on it that they noticed. While they did this, I kept a list of all the items they mentioned. Andre started. “I spy with my little eye Mickey Mouse!” Rola followed, “I spy with my little eye some fruit!” They continued in this fashion integrating one of their favorite games, ‘I Spy,’ into the textual analysis I was attempting. For me, this was a reminder of possibilities for the ongoing creation of curricular spaces for critical literacy as we moved back and forth between my capitalizing on their interests in the popular snack, and their capitalizing on the activity I had initiated by integrating, into the naming activity, the game, ‘I Spy.’

What is difficult in creating these curricular spaces is resisting over-schooling the children’s topics and co-opting their interests thereby diminishing their pleasure with it. These spaces, therefore, need to be negotiated carefully with attention paid to the interests of the children.

We continued our activity by talking about what kind of work each piece of information could accomplish and discussing who might want that information and why. Part of what I talked about with the children was the ways in which word and images work together and apart to produce differential effects for the reader. Emily noted, “I want the information about peeling the Mickey Mouse shape.” She continued by saying she liked the Peel-Outs better than other snacks because of the Mickey Mouse shapes in the fruity candy. Miguel suggested that his father would want the fruit because “that’s yucky good for you.” Apparently, his father only lets him eat ‘good’ snacks. Once we had established that various texts and images are desirable to different groups of people and for different reasons, we continued by talking about how, in particular, the words and images work. We began to unpack the linguistic features on the box, analyzing the effects
on the reader, of the words, pictures and symbols. I did this with them as one way
to begin identifying the cultural values being promoted and presented, for whom
and in what ways. For instance, in a society that is bombarded with informational
text on the nutritional values of food, it is no wonder that Miguel is drawn to the
‘health aspect’ of Peel-Outs.

To do this work, I discussed with them what they thought were good ideas
and bad ideas for texts and images to be included on the box if they were to be re-designed. Following were some of their responses.

**Andrei**

Andrei thought it would be a good idea to include images of fruit and kids to
show that the fruits are good for the kids. He thought it was a bad idea to have
anything having to do with dirt or garbage because that isn’t good for kids.

**Geoffrey**

Geoffrey also thought it would be a good idea to include fruit. He likes the Peel-
Outs and said his mom would buy them if they were good for him, “and if there’s
fruit in them she’ll buy them.” He thought it would be a bad idea to have a per-
son’s name like “Geoffrey” because then “other kids who aren’t Geoffrey won’t
think they should buy it.”

**Emily**

Emily drew her family to represent something good that would make them buy
the Peel-Outs. She said, “People like to be happy and this is happy.” Note that
Emily offers lifestyle as a conceptual frame for selling fruity Peel-Outs. She referred
to her design as “the same as on TV” referring to recent ads for such companies
as Target, Gap and Old Navy that portray family and peer activities and people
doing enjoyable things together as a concept for selling clothing using very subtle
branding of these products. So, clearly, different communicative processes are
thrown in the mix.

**Miguel**

Miguel drew a picture of bees to represent a bad idea stating, “If you are allergic
than … aha—you’ll be scared to death to buy this.” He also offers a particular
lifestyle that promotes well-being and safety.

Hilary Janks (1993) notes that identifying discourses, which are at work in texts,
is an important part of reading critically and interrogating texts. Already, the
children through their selections of good and bad ideas are making visible the
discursive life styles (namely health, safety, and happiness) or ways of being that
would lead someone, in particular adults in their lives, to buy or not buy the Peel-Outs.

Following this, we talked about how language works on consumers, such as themselves. We discussed how words, images, and symbols on the food packaging work to position the ‘buyer’ of the product as a believer, someone who puts faith in what the product claims to deliver. In doing so, we touched on the feelings and emotions that are encouraged and promoted through combinations of words and images. We also discussed the notion of temptation and how consumers might be tempted to buy particular products or goods and the role that such elements as font style or color might play.

Having done some deconstructive work we turned our attention to redesigning and creating our own versions of the Peel-Out boxes. To do this I gave the children the option of using a black-line representing the front section of the box.

The children then took their collection of good ideas and used them to redesign the Peel-Out box. Following this, they considered whether words would or would not help sell the product. Emily felt that words would not be helpful if it was on the box but words would be helpful in a television commercial. Without hesitation, the children stood from their chairs and began acting out their good ideas.

We talked about who would say which lines and where they would position themselves in the shot. Miguel held up a make-believe camera in what became his directorial debut. “And action …,” he called out signaling for the performance to begin. With this Emily entered stage left humming all the while. “Cut … cut …,” the director called out. “Just walk the dog, don’t hum!” he said firmly. Dogs were part of Emily’s concept for the commercial. Nowhere in her drawing had she hinted at music as an integral part of her ‘good idea.’

With this, we talked about the use of music and what kind of music would work or not work—how loud or how soft it should be and why, along with what effect different kinds of music would have on the viewer. More and more learning was generated as we further deconstructed the Fruity Peel-outs box looking at other areas of the curriculum and talking in the language of science or math from a critical literacy perspective.

We also went on-line to take a look at the website of the company that manufactures the Fruity Peel-Outs. While on the site we discovered a comments page. Deciding on whether or not to submit a comment resulted in another flurry of discussion and activity where the children debated over what to say in their comment. During this debate, we talked about how the size of the comment box limits what you can say in terms of the number of words you can use as well as the communication system through which to convey your message. We talked about possible reasons for the limited space for comment and came up with a short list including “maybe the company wants to hear a little from us, but not a lot” and “maybe they don’t really want to hear from us but maybe they just think they
have to say they want to know what we think.” When we didn’t hear back, after submitting our comments and suggestions, the children returned to their thoughts regarding the comment box and discussed further whether companies really do pay lip service to thoughts from consumers and talked about other possible ways that consumers could get their comments across to such companies as the manufacturer of the Fruity Peel-Outs.

So imagine the potential, the learning, and the literacies that were constructed. Certainly not the kind of literacies that stems from mandated prescriptive literacy programs. Also imagine how much more accessible a curriculum that incorporates the use of everyday text and print would be for a linguistically and culturally diverse group of learners. One of the advantages of using popular culture and everyday print is that the texts used can and should be negotiated with the children based on what is interesting and intriguing to them and using textual materials available in their lives.

**Becoming Informed by Children’s Unexpected and Problematic Performances**

Comber and Simpson (1995) note that we need to be informed by children’s unexpected responses and problematic performances to see what kinds of readers, writers, spellers, speakers, listeners, viewers, they are becoming. Often these unexpected responses come from the everyday issues they bring with them to the classroom. The problematic comes into play as we define these issues as extra-curricular, distractive or disconnected with school literacy. So how do we capitalize on children's unexpected and problematic performances? A place to start is by carving out spaces in the curriculum for practicing critical literacies and putting into effective use the issues that children raise and, using language to question, interrogate, problematize, de-naturalize, interrupt, disrupt that which appears normal, natural, ordinary, mundane, everyday as well as to re-design, re-construct, re-imagine, re-think, re-consider social worlds, spaces and places.

With the pre-school children, I attempted to provide opportunities to examine the ideologies of everyday texts that they brought to the classroom from the early beginnings of schooling to provide opportunities for them to begin practicing critical literacies while also learning to negotiate meaning, participating as code breakers, text participants, text users and critical analysts of everyday social and school texts (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

The potential of looking in new ways at the texts, which surround us and construct our worlds, still remains largely untapped in early childhood classrooms (Comber & Simpson, 1995). There is much we can learn from these new textual practices. What I’ve shared with you in this chapter is a snippet of possibility. There is much work to be done and lots of room for it, more than you might immediately imagine. How might you create spaces in your settings to take up critical literacies during these hard times?
CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMON CORE

The CCS does not address the learning of pre-schoolers. I encourage you to take a look at the ELA Standards for kindergarten. Compare the complexity of these standards with the quality of the students’ work in this unit. It appears that the activity of these five children met a variety of kindergarten standards for reading and writing. But given the maturity of thinking done by Vivian’s students, I used the anchor standard here, that more closely capture the kinds of thinking done by the students.

Student Learning Activities: analyzed and evaluated the picture and text of the Peel-Out wrapper, including how they are designed to appeal to and position various audiences; redesigned the text and images on the wrapper to improve its appeal to various audiences, including a new wrapper and a television commercial; wrote on-line ‘comments’ to the manufacturer of Peel-Out; also, analyzed the ‘comments’ section to the manufacturers

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4** Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6** Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.6** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.7** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focuses questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.6** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.
COMMENTARY

In Chapters 2 and 3, the textual focus has been the everyday texts of Mother’s Day catalogs and fast food wrappers. As I first read Chapter 3, I had two observations that jumped out at me immediately. First, I noticed how much of the unit reflected the initiatives of the children, in part, along with the teacher’s own initiatives. Second, the enthusiasm and enjoyment of the students is substantial, although perhaps not unusual for preschoolers. As Vivian notes, critical literacy doesn’t need to be upsetting or insufferable work. Instead, this kind of work is most effective when it leads to positive emotions, even when the goals of this work entail the dismantling of inequities and injustice.

References


(Eds.), *Critiquing whole language and classroom inquiry* (pp. 200–215). Urban, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.


EXTENSION

I realize some readers may believe that the students in this chapter are unusual, and the average 3–5 year old is incapable of critical analysis and, especially, incapable of the kind of sustained attention demonstrated by these children. Of course, there will be some preschoolers who are immature and aren’t ready for this kind of work. But with developmentally appropriate activities like those enacted by Vivian and Jennifer, preschoolers are capable of this kind of critical work. Vivian Vasquez has written several books that are full of illustrative vignettes and stories, showing preschoolers engaged in critical literacy, using everyday texts and, recently, podcasts and new media. See the Resources section at the end of the book for references to her work.

Cereal boxes represent another kind of everyday text that is worthy of critical analysis. Leonie Arthur (2001, p. 190) suggests some sensible questions to ask when examining cereal boxes, questions that are appropriate for young learners, from preschool to third grade.

- Which is your favourite cereal? Why?
- What sort of print and images are used on cereal packets? Why?
- Which cereals do you think the manufacturers want children to eat? How do you know?
- What does it say about the cereal on the packet? Why?
- How can we find out what ingredients are in the cereal?
- Is the cereal as good as the manufacturers say?

What other kinds of everyday texts could you use with your students, and how can you adapt the work of Jennifer and Vivian to your own teaching situation?
PART IIB

Focusing on Issues and Cultural Identity
Third graders responded critically to text by using Augusto Boal’s Image Theatre, a variation of Theatre of the Oppressed. Doing Image Theatre, the students read some provocative narrative texts and then created body sculptures to represent their understandings, especially their sense of unequal power relations in those texts. I wonder about the conditions underlying student engagement when reading school-sponsored texts. What is it about certain readings that ‘hook’ students and promote sustained engagement? And how important is it that teachers are skilled at identifying and using provocative and compelling texts as the basis for curricular activity?

In 1957, Art Linkletter’s TV show House Party and corresponding book, Kids Say the Darndest Things (Oliver & Nelson, 2010), captured what the audience already knew about young children: They say things that make us laugh.

But parents, educators, grandparents, and babysitters who listen closely know that young children’s understandings of the world are not only often humorous but also provocative, analytical, questioning, and thoughtful. For example, after Carrie’s third graders (see next section) read I Hate English (Levine, 1989), a book about Mei Mei, a young girl newly arrived in the United States from Hong Kong, the students explored the relationships between her classmates and Mei Mei as well as what it is like to be caught in parents’ major life choices. Here is part of a lengthy conversation by a group of four third-graders.

*Odette:* It’s … hard to let someone new be your friend.

*Collin:* No, it’s not. All you have to do is be nice to them if they’re nice.
Thomas:  Well, Mei Mei kind of wasn’t nice.
Odette:  She wanted friends and people to be nice to her. When I came to [this school] last year I just wanted people to be nice to me. But it was easy for me because I speak English.

After their discussion about Mei Mei’s difficulties, they developed a dramatic representation of their understandings of Mei Mei’s oppression through an Image Theatre (Boal, 1979):

Odette and Edie stand together pointing at the two boys who are sitting on the floor covering their faces. The children subsequently explained that the two girls were pointing at the two boys who could not speak English. The boys covered their faces because they were embarrassed and sad.

These third-grade children were engaged in critical literacy.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is defined in many, overlapping ways: as issues of morality, educational equity, power, fairness, positioning, complexity, and multiple viewpoints (Bean & Moni, 2003; Luke & Freebody, 1997; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Thus, the purpose of reading is to read the word in order to read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This is in contrast to the dominant practice in the teaching of reading: to learn sight words, to build fluency, or to answer text-dependent, i.e., literal comprehension, questions.

In classrooms, critical literacy can occur in two spaces simultaneously. First, it can occur within the teaching space, wherein critical teachers become aware of their pedagogy (conscientization) and then engage in critical reflection followed by action (praxis). This new action is then examined through critical reflection, repeating the processes in a spiraling fashion. When the teacher takes a critical view of her teaching, she asks, in part, if her pedagogy privileges some and marginalizes others. The second space in which critical literacy occurs is within the learning space as students engage in opportunities that encourage them to recognize and name oppressive circumstances and, when possible, engage in praxis that can contribute to a more just world.

Carrie is a third-grade teacher in the Midwest. She and I shared a commitment to schools as places with the primary purpose of preparing children to become engaged members of a democratic society. A subset of this commitment is to work intentionally to assure that all students have equitable access to rigorous, intellectually rich curricular experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). We viewed critical literacy as one type of broad educational practice that could meet these purposes. Additionally, we both staunchly rejected a deficit model of children. This chapter is the story of Carrie and me, a university literacy teacher
educator, engaged in an action research project to explore the use of Boal’s Image Theatre (1979) to promote critical literacy.

Theatre of the Oppressed—Image Theatre

Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979) is an engaging and effective way to create classroom contexts that promote critical literacy. Employing theatre as a means to engage children in learning is not new. Theoretically, theatre can be considered one of the sign systems that describe multiple ways of creating meaning including but going beyond linguistic language (Siegel, 2006). For example, Wolf (1998), Wolf and Enciso (1994), and Smagorinsky and Coppock (1994) describe how theatre and other art forms give children opportunities to connect with texts. Rosenberg, Rodriguez, Rabkin, and Christy (2000) describe how the arts in general can enhance learning and problem solving, among other contributions to children’s education.

Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal created Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) to provide a space for “turn[ing] the practice of theatre into an effective tool for the comprehension of social and personal problems and the search for their solutions” (Boal, 1995, p. 15). It is designed to develop one’s critical perspective. TO parallels Freire’s notion of praxis through the added dimension of theatrical expression. Participants can try out solutions to problems in a space just outside of one’s reality prior to applying it in the actual environment.

One type of TO is Image Theatre. Image Theatre entails students creating static sculptures to represent their ideas and responses to provocative or critical issues-oriented text. The materials used to create the sculpture are the children; their bodies become the materials they use to build their sculpture. In Image Theatre, participants identify their oppression, often exploring ways in which they can rid themselves of it.

In our adaptation of Image Theatre, we had students read or listen to some narrative, issues-oriented texts (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999). We then organized them into groups of four to five children. We asked them to talk about the ideas in the text while attending to the ways in which the main character was being treated, how they and the character felt, and to think about how they could create body sculptures reflecting their ideas and feelings in which everyone in the group was part of the sculpture. Boal (1992) called this the “image of the group” (p. 180). We also explained that this sculpture cannot move or make sounds. We had confidence that Carrie’s third graders could engage the text as a vehicle to explore social power (Kincheloe, 2004; Luke, 2000).

Image Theatre in a Third-Grade Classroom

We originally developed critical literacy opportunities through Image Theatre as a research study (Rozansky & Santos, 2009). We had not found any research about Image Theatre with children and thought this would be a worthwhile
addition to the research literature on TO and critical literacy. After our study, Carrie continued to incorporate Image Theatre into her reading program. The examples we provide here include children’s discussions and Image Theatres from the study and subsequent lessons.

The students in the Midwestern, urban school in which Carrie taught third grade belonged to marginalized groups that typically experienced low academic achievement: about 25% African-American, 60% White, 9% Latino; and 66% of the students were on free or reduced school lunch. Two thirds of the students were reading below grade level, about one third reading at grade level, and two students reading above grade level.

Carrie had learned of Image Theatre in one of Carol’s university courses in a reading master’s program and had tried it with her students a year prior to the study. When Carol approached her to participate in a research study about Image Theatre as a means to encourage critical literacy, she enthusiastically agreed (see Rozansky & Aagesen, 2010; Rozansky & Santos, 2009).

Identifying Critical Texts

The first task was to identify critical texts. These are texts that contain narratives reflecting interpersonal tensions in a context of unequal power relations (Leland et al., 1999). The critical texts described in this chapter include the following:

- “Teacher Said [Tyrell]” (English & Bates, 2004), a short text that describes how a teacher chastised a young boy in her class for making excuses about unsatisfactory schoolwork;
- “57 Steps [Tyrell],” from the same collection, tells a brief story of the main character who is sent to the office by the teacher because of his inappropriate behavior;
- Baseball Saved Us (Mochizuki, 1993), a story about survival in the Japanese internment camps;
- Best Friends (Krupinski, 1998), a book about the friendship between a Native American girl and a White girl during the time of mass relocation of Indians in the 19th century; and
- I Hate English (Levine, 1989), a book about a recent immigrant from Hong Kong and the difficulties she faces as a non-English speaker.

Implementing Image Theatre

To begin, Carrie read a story aloud to the class while they followed along in their copies. Next, Carol led the children in two games selected from the many games Boal (1992) developed that lead participants to consider oppression in a general sense and, also, how to use their bodies and voices to express meaning in new ways. On the first day the students participated in Image Theatre. Carrie,
Using Theatre of the Oppressed in Class

Carol, and the principal first modeled how to dialogue and subsequently create an Image Theatre.

The directions to children were simple: They were to form small groups, discuss the story Carrie and they had just read, consider how the main character was being treated and their feelings about this treatment, and talk about ways in which they could develop one Image Theatre that reflected these ideas. I reminded students that everyone would be part of the sculpture and that, once they formed their sculpture, they could not move or make any sounds. Carrie and I walked around to prompt children if necessary and to answer questions.

We brought the children together after each group had created and rehearsed their Image Theatre. The next phase was the performance. We pushed back the desks to create a large space in the middle of the room. The audience (or, as Boal identifies them, the “spect-actors”) formed a circle while the performing group moved to the middle and displayed their Image Theatre. The actors maintained their sculpture while the circle of children slowly walked around (in one direction) so they could view the sculpture from all sides. When they were finished, Carol prompted the performers to ‘relax’ and invited several spectators to share their interpretation of the Image Theatre. Next, the performing group told the class what they had intended. The purpose here was to provide an opportunity for children to interpret the text several times: as they read and/or listened to the text, during post-reading discussion, and as they created or responded to an Image Theatre.

Children’s Critical Dialogue

Here are more examples of the children’s critical dialogue and description of their Image Theatres.

Children usually responded to “Teacher Said [Tyrell]” (English & Bates, 2004) by focusing on the teacher’s inappropriate, ‘mean’ behaviors toward the young student. However, some children wondered if the student, indeed, deserved some type of reprimand for not doing his work. They also said,

John: That teacher shouldn’t say that mean stuff about him.
Jane: I think that the teacher is just giving him advice …
Walter: She could have said it at least a little bit more better than the way it came out.

Regardless how often students thought the boy needed to take more responsibility, they all agreed that the teacher should not have been so ‘mean.’ Figure 5.1 shows two of the students in their Image Theatre.

They are in the hallway, looking through the glass in the classroom door, angry at the teacher because “the teacher was yelling.” In the next short text, “57 Steps,” one of the groups grappled with whether or not the teacher was angry
with the main character, Tyrell. She had given him a note to take to the principal’s office; he counts the 57 steps of his journey. The children wonder why the teacher does not call on him when he raises his hand.

Walter: She probably just didn’t like him.
Jack: I think she doesn’t like him.

The children were delving into the text to understand why Tyrell might be taking a note to the office. They wondered if he was delivering a note unrelated to his behavior or if the note told the principal he was in trouble. As Jack explains, “He might be delivering it but I’m saying he’s going to the principal’s office … ’cause why would the baddest kid in the class go to the principal’s office just to deliver a note?”

In this Image Theatre, three students lined up and pointed at the Tyrell character (Figure 5.2).

Walter, who played Tyrell, explained, “They was all pointing at me ’cause I was doing bad stuff.” Jocelyn continued, “And he [Walter] turned his back on us.” Jack added, “’Cause teachers really hate it when kids turn their backs.” Having three adults who have the most power in a school all pointing at the student emphasizes the extreme power differential between them and the child. Another group, through the positioning of their bodies in their Image Theatre, showed how very sad they believed Tyrell felt (Figure 5.3).
FIGURE 5.2 Three students pointing at Tyrell (source: adapted from Rozansky & Santos, 2009)

FIGURE 5.3 Students’ heads bending down, portraying Tyrell’s sadness (source: adapted from Rozansky & Santos, 2009)
The girl, representing the teacher, has her back to us and stands with her arms crossed in anger. The four students on the floor with their heads bending down portray Tyrell’s sadness. Tyrell’s sadness is so strong it must be represented by four students! The other students in the figure are some of the spect-actors walking around to see the sculpture from multiple angles.

Reading *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993) led to critical dialogue among children in each of the four groups. Students in one group wondered how innocent people could be locked up. This curiosity led to their reflection on current and historical racist practices.

*Michael:* People were so mean to them [Japanese-Americans]. They didn’t even do anything wrong.

*Miriam:* But people thought they did.

*Steve:* But they didn’t.

*Jermaine:* It’s like that for black people, too.

In their Image Theatre, four of the children stood shoulder to shoulder, representing the fence that surrounded the internment camp, while the fifth student tried to look through the fence to the outside. It is interesting how they used their bodies to represent an oppressive physical barrier. Another group also wondered about who deserves to be imprisoned and who does not, connected the treatment of the Japanese-Americans to slaves, and also speculated why others did not help them.

*Cole:* My dad’s in the Army, and he says they lock people up.

*Zola:* But those people are bad. They’re supposed to be locked up. These people are just Chinese; they’re not bad. [Confusion about which Asian-American group was placed in internment camps.]

*Cole:* And like slaves. They weren’t bad. And mixed [race] people weren’t very popular. They got treated real bad. …

*Zola:* Somebody should’ve stuck up for them. Where were all their friends and family to help them?

*Opal:* Probably locked up, too.

These students created an Image Theatre of what they imagined could be, namely an image that represented people working together so they could play baseball and be happy.

Another group compared internment camps with slavery, including a discussion that considered the ranking of oppressions, wondering if some oppressions are worse than others.

*John:* Life was very difficult for them [Japanese-Americans].

*Janet:* Yeah, and it wasn’t fair.

*John:* They didn’t know how to give support to each other. They had never done something like that before. It’s happened in history a lot.
Tammy: But I don’t think that makes them feel any better.

Wally: They locked slaves up, too. They needed Harriet Tubman to help them escape.

Janet: They couldn’t escape. They were locked up. Slaves weren’t. Slaves just had to secretly run away but they weren’t locked up.

John: That’s true. It was easier for slaves to run away.

Wally: It wasn’t easy.

John: No, but it was better than being in a cage.

This group’s Image Theatre demonstrates a third theme, namely the contrast between children’s enjoyment of playing baseball with the reality of being imprisoned. One student took on the role of a guard. He enlarged his physical stance and thus his power by standing on his toes and crossing his arms. His face portrayed meanness because he did not like the people he was guarding. While another child was playing baseball and was cheered on by another, an elderly prisoner passed out on the field from thirst.

After the students read Best Friends (Krupinski, 1998), they again contemplated political issues. Not surprisingly, the students talked about the treatment of Native Americans. The recurring theme in their discussion was the relationships between White settlers and the Native Americans and the role the government played in the oppression of Native Americans.

Mick: I think it’s sad that the White people wanted to take away the Indian’s land. They were there first. And there weren’t any laws or anything about it. How come Lily was afraid of Charlotte?

Marcia: She wasn’t afraid of her. She was afraid of her family. Cause they’re White people and White people hurt Indians. She was afraid to get hurt. …

Sam: But they were best friends. You don’t hurt your friends.

Mick: But they didn’t trust each other. Well, the girls trusted each other, but the kids never do anything bad. It’s the grownups who usually cause war and stuff like that. So she had to be afraid of the grownups.

Sonny: But they didn’t hurt her.

Jerome: No, but they might.

This group’s Image Theatre portrayed the contradictory realities of the two girls in their small world inside the larger historical context of Whites’ oppression of Native Americans. Charlotte, the White girl, was teaching Lily, of the Nez Perce tribe, how to read while the other students portrayed the Whites telling the Indians they had to leave. In a similar manner, another group’s image showed two children hugging while the other children stood with their hands on their hips, signifying the White men forcing the Indians to leave.

Another group compared Charlotte and Lily’s story to prejudice in today’s society:
Karen: It’s like people now. Some people still hate black people, but not everybody. So there are nice people and bad people. Charlotte’s family was nice people.

This group’s image also showed the contrast between the innocent friends of the girls and the reality of being a minority: Two students held hands to represent Charlotte and Lily’s close friendship while the other two students represented Lily’s parents’ relief (with smiles and fists in the air) at escaping from the White men intent on killing them.

Discussion

Image Theatre (Boal, 1992) mediated the students’ critical exploration of these texts (Wertsch, 1985). We expected students to take a critical stance because the texts we selected all contained inter-group or interpersonal relations shaped by unequal power relationships. But the quality of our questions mattered, as well. We frequently reminded the students to consider how the main characters were being treated and how the characters felt. The children easily and seemingly naturally aligned with the characters, talking about how they might feel if in a similar situation.

The Image Theatres can be viewed as a continuation of children’s oral dialogue. The richness of students’ talk was evident in the evocative nature of their Image Theatres. Additionally, the ways in which they sculpted their bodies, whether or not they were aware of it, enhanced their critical responses, adding a dimension beyond language—how they stood, where they looked, when they sank to the floor—all contributed to their understandings and interpretations of the texts and the spectators’ understandings of the sculptures.

In other classrooms in Carrie’s school, in the school district, and across the country, children like Carrie’s—living in poverty, many with low test scores—were likely to experience basal readers, scripted programs, isolated reading skills instruction, or some combination. After this very brief action research study, Carrie noticed that her students more frequently approached classroom activities from a critical stance. This encouraged her to continue engaging students in Image Theatre.

This study occurred during the feverish period of Adequate Yearly Progress and No Child Left Behind and its progeny, Race to the Top and the Common Core State Standards.

However, Carrie and her principal continue to feel confident that engaging in critical literacy and taking the time to develop and share their Image Theatres will not adversely affect her students. Quite the opposite. Students’ critical questions and empathetic responses lead them more deeply into texts. We found that Carrie’s third graders often revisited texts, on their own, to double-check what they remembered or to look again at what a character said or did. They were thoughtful and
strategic in their representations of meaning through Image Theatre. They were thinking. They were critically evaluating ideas. And they were engaged!

**CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMON CORE**

I use the third-grade CCS for the ELA that can be addressed in the use of Image Theatre as described by the Carol.

Student Learning Activities: read, discussed, and dramatized narrative text for its literal and inferential meanings; read, discussed, and dramatized narrative text, with invitations to criticize/question author bias.

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.1** Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.3** Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.5** Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier scenes.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.6** Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters.

**COMMENTARY**

What is particularly interesting about this approach to critical literacy is the unique design feature of the pedagogy: using body sculpture as a means of expression. Besides its appeal to students to get out of their seats, using the body to express meanings is indigenous to everyday life and reflects how humans communicate naturally. Limiting students to the written word, silently glued to their seats, when responding to text and learning in interaction with text, I believe, is mis-educative.

The reader also might notice how students engaged in multiple iterations of reflection on the texts. In the current frenzied era of the Common Core, when the mantra for so many teachers is ‘no time,’ the many invitations to Carrie’s students to reflect on their reading using multiple modalities is refreshing. This kind of reflective work bodes well for student learning.
Critical Texts


References


(43rd yearbook of the National Reading Conference) (pp. 335–341). Chicago, IL: National Reading Conference.
The authors were invited to contribute a chapter on having young children do climate change action projects. To me, the chapter they submitted was not quite what I had in mind. Their thesis: Before children can meaningfully engage in the formal analysis of climate change and climate change activism, they must first have sustained experience in nature. In a sense, this is the most subversive chapter in the book. The authors recommend a cultural practice that represents the opposite of the dominant discourses in American society: consumerism, technology, and competition. Sustained time in nature, engaging in non-structured imaginative play, learning to feel, touch, smell, and drink the pleasures of our primordial world, some of which still exist, can you imagine planning excursions into nature with your students? And how can you imagine bringing nature into your classroom and around the school?

Introduction

Perhaps you remember when nature was inhabited, not only by birds, beetles and butterflies, but also by magic. Maybe you were lucky enough to experience the childhood joy of knowing where the trolls lived, catching the rustle of the gnome retreating into the undergrowth, or hearing the creaking exhortation of the oak hailing you, ‘good morning’. Or perhaps, like many modern children, you saw and heard nothing of the voice of nature calling out to you. Fear not, the authors of this article are not unworldly animists, but we do hold that there is a value—an intrinsic value—in nature, and one that should be experienced by children and by all of us. Furthermore, we believe that the principal practical means to ena-
ble children to begin to engage meaningfully with environmental issues such as climate change is to seek ways to help them find this value, or ‘occasion’ the value in nature: being realistic, we conjure the ‘unreal’ to discover real value.

For many years, quite a few educational writers seemed to believe that a good way to encourage children to become active ‘green citizens’ was to teach them about ‘global warming’, or deforestation: that is, to bestow upon them relevant knowledge. Whilst there is certainly a vital place for this approach with secondary/high school students, we think this is a fundamentally mistaken approach for younger children. In this chapter we take a different approach, encouraging both younger children and the pre-service teachers who will work with them to reconnect with local places as sites of inspiration and sources of deeper environmental awareness.

**Where Are We Now?**

Back in the early days of environmental education, research (Arcury, 1990; Bradley, Waliczek, & Zajicek, 1990; Ramsey & Rickson, 1976) found a correlation between knowledge and understanding and environmental attitude and action. This research was based on a society with little to no previous environmental knowledge on children’s part. Today, however, environmental issues are, to some extent, being taken seriously by governments and a public with a great deal of knowledge being gained through everyday life and the media. This, of course, can only be a positive development, but it means that environmental education can no longer exist in the same form as it did when public knowledge was very limited. An environmental education system that relies solely on attitudes being developed through increased knowledge will achieve very limited results. Teachers, educational planners and policymakers need to look beyond knowledge and, now, develop different strategies. We argue that these should be aimed first and foremost at developing positive attitudes towards nature and through creatively inspiring children to address the environmental issues they face through emotional and imaginative reconnection with places.

In his book *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect* (2004), David Orr argues that education was both the problem and the solution in terms of the attitude of Western societies to the environment. Orr claims that the environmental crisis has been the result of years of education that has neglected to emphasise the importance of maintaining the relationship between humans and nature; in their quest to dominate the earth, humans have been alienated from the environment which they are reliant upon for their survival.

Orr also argues that emotion and, in particular, love has to play a part in our lives and in education for any serious environmental change to take place. He states that as individuals we ‘must learn to act selflessly’ (Orr, 2004, p. 44) as opposed to self-interest. The only way this is going to be achieved is if the environment and human emotion are reconnected. ‘We cannot win this battle to save
species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love’ (Gould, cited in Orr, 2004, p. 43). In order to achieve this deep emotional connection, Orr suggests that learning should take place outside as often as possible, stating that education should turn its back on ‘tired indoor pedagogy’, a pedagogy reliant on inert or abstract knowledge. Instead, this new pedagogy must try to reconnect children with nature ‘to teach the things that one might imagine the earth would teach us’ (Orr, 2004, p. 49).

The breaking down of the relationship between individuals and nature, Orr argues, has resulted in a condition known as biophobia, which ‘ranges from discomfort in “natural” places to active scorn for whatever is not manmade, managed or air conditioned’ (Orr, 2004, p. 131). Most humans have little concept of wilderness and have become ‘separated from the conditions of nature’ (Orr, 2004, p. 132). The contrasting condition according to Orr is biophilia. This condition is a relational orientation towards nature, which E. O. Wilson defined as ‘the urge to affiliate with other forms of life’ (cited in Orr, 2004, p. 132). Orr states that for biophilia to develop humans must experience nature in childhood. ‘If by some fairly young age, however, nature has not been experienced as a friendly place of adventure and excitement, biophilia will not take hold as it might have’ (Orr, 2004, p. 143).

Orr calls for a ‘biophilia revolution’ (Orr, 2004, p. 145), through ‘the establishment of more natural places, places of mystery where children can roam, explore, and imagine’ (Orr, 2004, p. 147). Through an education that ‘fosters innate biophilia and the analytical abilities and practical skills necessary for a world that takes life seriously’ (Orr, 2004, p. 148), the natural tendencies within children to affiliate with nature can be encouraged. The aim of this type of education is to provide an ‘organic approach to knowledge’, provide ‘the tools for action’, and unite people ‘by a common feeling for their landscape, their literature and language, their local ways’ (Mumford, cited in Orr, 2004, p. 148).

In contrast with Orr’s biophobia, David Sobel introduced the concept of ecophobia, the fear of ecological deterioration. Through teaching too abstractly, too early, ‘We prematurely ask children to deal with problems beyond their understanding and control, prematurely recruit them to solve the mammoth problems of an adult world, then I think we cut them off from the possible sources of strength’ (Sobel, 1996, p. 5).

If educators are to help heal the broken bond between the young and the natural world, they and the rest of us must confront the unintended educational consequences of an overly abstract science education: ecophobia and the death of natural history studies (Louv, 2005, p. 135).

By providing environmental education at a level inappropriate for the child’s age, educators might unintentionally create barriers to nature as children may feel ‘the natural world is being abused and they just don’t want to have to deal with it’ (Sobel, 1996, p. 2). Sobel and Louv both argue that the quintessential element of environmental education is that children experience the environment first hand.
and thus ‘have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it and feel comfortable in it, before being asked to heal its wounds’ (Sobel, 1996, p. 10). Indeed, if only ‘delivering’ environmental education with the aim of equipping children with the global knowledge and understanding to motivate them to take action, educators are neglecting the relationships required to emotionally connect children with their environments, which must be the basis for their later participation in environmental actions: ‘Our problem is that we are trying to invoke knowledge and responsibility, before we have allowed a loving relationship to flourish’ (Sobel, 1996, p. 10)!

**Deficit and Naivety**

A report published by the National Trust in the UK in March 2012, entitled *Natural Childhood*, expressed concern for UK children, claiming that ‘in a single generation since the 1970s, children’s “radius of activity”—the area around their home where they are allowed to roam unsupervised—has declined by almost 90%’ (Moss, 2012, p. 5). The report cited ‘nature deficit disorder’ as a real problem in childhood and claimed that children are ‘missing out on the pure joy of connection with the natural world; as a result, as adults they lack an understanding of the importance of nature to human society’ (Moss, 2012, p. 2). This report called for more initiatives offering children the opportunity to learn outdoors, claiming that this ‘is exactly the kind of sector-wide initiative needed to achieve real and lasting change’ (Moss, 2012, p. 10). So, what is nature deficit disorder?

The highly contentious phrase comes from the journalist Richard Louv whose *Last Child in the Woods* became a rare example of a broadly ‘educational’ international bestseller on children’s relationship with the natural world. Louv argues that trapped within a society full of time constraints and technological advancements, children are losing touch with nature. Louv provocatively describes this condition as ‘nature deficit disorder’, resulting in ‘diminished use of senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses’ (Louv, 2005, p. 36). Louv argues that ‘children need nature for the healthy development of their senses, and therefore, for learning and creativity’ (Louv, 2005, p. 55). Like many such as Orr (2004) and Leopold (1949) before him, Louv believes the technological advancements and the ‘know it all state of mind’ have separated individuals from immediate sensory awareness in nature. Indirect, technological experience has replaced the sights, sounds and emotional connection experienced through direct contact with nature.

Louv’s particular contribution to the contemporary debate on children and nature is to position separation from nature as a kind of ‘illness’—a disorder comparable with, perhaps ‘attention deficit disorder’. We reject both the ‘disorder’ and the ‘deficit’ tag for several reasons. First, the emphasis on ‘lack’ represents a rather demotivating place to start, both for parents and for children. We emphasise not the damage wreaked by a ‘disorder’, but the opportunity for growth that
unmediated encounters with nature offer. But neither do we dispute the challenge involved in finding and providing such opportunities. Like David Orr (2004), we believe that maximising experience of natural places as homely sites of welcome and adventure enables the limited appreciation and understanding associated with nature-naiveté to be overcome. But our experience suggests something more: it suggests that the state of being of young children in nature is more fully realised if their naiveté is transcended initially in the natural magic of place, the all-encompassing child-world of this place, right now, utterly absorbing and suffused with imaginative possibilities which fully inhabit the place in its totality, for its totality is all there is in this moment.

Second, we reject the nature deficit model as it appears to put the onus on children and parents to find solutions, even ‘treatments’ to address a lack. Again, this misunderstands the fact that children’s alienation from nature is neither the child’s nor the parent’s making.

Nature-Naivety and Natural Re-enlivening

In a previous paper (Witt & Clarke, 2013), our approach has been to propose an alternative:

We shift the focus from nature deficit to nature-naivety. We conceptualise naiveté as a lack of experience, innocence, or simplicity. A naif, or inexperienced person, is in the process of formation, in search of values and morals, and responsive to others.

(Witt & Clarke, 2013, p. 11)

and to nature. Here we take naivety to be a positive characteristic, suggestive not of deficit but, rather, of hope. We see in this innocence and hopefulness the potential for every child to develop the range and depth of their relations with nature.

Like Louv, we believe these relations have been stunted by features of the society in which some children live, features characterised by the ways in which the immediacy of children’s relations with nature have been mediated and mis-directed by a pervasive childhood culture that finds value only in the packaged product, the film tie-in or the closed and restrictive technologies of play. How much of what a child sees and feels about nature comes via some TV show, game or online social medium? How much does ‘product’ come between the child and nature? If the answer is that nature is almost entirely mediated in this way, then you may ask, is this any different from the children of previous generations finding beneath the millstream bridge the trolls they had met in stories? We say it is different insofar as the conjuring of creatures and spirits which are particular to this place, born of it, imbue this particular environment with a magic and a value, whereas the ‘parachuting’ into this landscape of figures from a film or game populates it with characters extrinsic to its essential being.
In common with many contemporary ecological thinkers (Mathews, 1991; Naess, 1988, 1995), we understand the essential being of nature as possessing *intrinsic value*. Intrinsic value is objective, not conferred upon nature by human judgement. Nature must be included among the facts of the world. Although intrinsic value is a function of the things that possess it, it is not arbitrary as are other values formed from a subject standpoint.

What has any of this to do with trolls? Well, so far, the talk of intrinsic value may have seemed rather abstract. Whilst we all know children who seem to intuit this value and to treat living things respectfully as a matter of course, we also have met many other children whose nature-naivety reflects as an indifference to natural beings and processes. The awakening of an awareness of the value of all living systems might, then, be realised by an imaginative re-animation of landscape which metaphorically brings the whole into connected life. A nature spirit, for the child, is not a mere isolate; rather, it is the ‘background’ come to life. The magic of the fairy or troll is that it emerges as a representative feature of the whole, as the personification of the place.

For the young child, the process of *meeting* nature as a living presence, sometimes companionable, sometimes threatening, and always significant rather than a source of indifference, might best be achieved in the imaginative attentiveness required to find and communicate with natural spaces in the form of its ‘spirits’, namely its elves or nymphs.

**Looking for Elves**

Woodlands are places of mystery and enchantment, and they offer an opportunity for children to experience the wonder of the natural world. This is a description of activities that have been shared with children to celebrate the magic of seemingly ordinary places on our doorstep. Several classes of children aged seven and eight ventured into a local ancient woodland for a day’s learning adventure. The children talked about their previous experiences of trees and forests in order to recognise their current knowledge of natural places and their existing personal geographies. The children noticed the elf door on the classroom wall. They began asking questions: e.g., What is it? Who does it belong to? Will someone use it? Why is it there? The following text was written on a message by the door and read to the class as a stimulus for the visit:

Elves come when you least expect them!
You turn around … and they are there …
On the way through the woods
Keep your eyes wide open
Elves come in all shapes and sizes they don’t all look the same
They don’t all look like elves
They don’t all mean to harm us
Honour the elves that you meet and learn from them
The class discussed the message and the importance of being open to the ‘possibilities’ of the place. The need for some children to suspend (dis)belief was also considered as they began their local woodland encounter. These mystical journeys into the unknown have been inspired by Van Matre’s (1990) earth education and Payne’s (2010) eco-pedagogical approaches in which stories and folklore are woven into first-hand, playful, sensory encounters with the real world. The magical element of the elves encouraged children to engage in imaginative play and help them develop their knowledge and understanding of local places. Building on their own natural curiosity, the children were invited to independently explore the woodland area; they observed carefully and examined the environment in order to look for signs of elves. As part of a research study the children were asked if they had seen elves and here are some of their responses:

Dan: Yes! We just imagined them.
Emily: I remember thinking that I saw an elf … It had a bluebell hat on; it was a lady who had long hair on top and green like grassy dress.
Oliver: We felt quite grown up so we thought it was funny that we were just pretending.
Andrew: Well, we thought we did! I think it was something a bit mythical looking back on things now.
Vicky: We learnt that there are magical creatures.

Open-ended enquiries have the potential to empower children to make individual and unique sense of their world. Joshua felt this approach was ‘really good because that is what the brain needs really … imagining the elves let our minds go free and we didn’t have to worry about anything.’ Valuing the opportunity to engage in imaginative play, Rosie stated, ‘We don’t use our imaginations as much in school as we do in the woods.’ A third child, Ben, said that exploring the woods looking for elves ‘makes you see things in a different way’. It is hoped that in the creation of a fantastical, unexpected experience, the magic of nature will be enhanced and intensified (Van Matre, 1990). These children were able to understand that respect for nature resulted from their woodland experience: ‘We learn it ourselves by being in such a nice place! By being in that place I want to look after it!’

On completion of the woodland exploration the children were encouraged to engage in place-making activities in which they were asked to build homes to attract the elves to the location. This first-hand immersive experience encouraged the children to engage sensorially with the woodland as they played, constructed and explored the possibilities of the environment. Andrew described how they explored the potential of the site: ‘There was this tree over a dip and we kinda put branches over the side. This is a really deep, deep chalk pit with a log over it. Me and Mike like to see who can get the furthest without falling off.’ The building of these small-scale homes can provide an insight into children’s views on everyday
spaces and to consider what is important to them. The elf residences have featured swimming pools, Jacuzzis, slides, fires, sofas, swings, washing lines and trampolines, etc. and the opportunities to give tours of their buildings provide the children with the chance to describe places. By encouraging this playful investigation of local landscapes, children are encouraged to ask questions and seek answers.

Throughout the day, clues in the form of riddles were left for the children to guide activities. One clue suggested that ‘Elves learn that if you sit in the woods and wait. Something happens …’ (Figure 6.1).

The children were very keen to ask their teacher if they could try this as they wanted to see what would happen. This provided an opportunity for the children to be still, to be silent and to engage in close encounters with the natural world. Laura observed, ‘I can remember sitting in the bluebells and waiting … I never looked at a bluebell so closely before!’ The children valued the opportunity for peaceful reflection as Andrew explained, ‘I like to sit and think … I don’t get much chance to sit still.’ Jessica added that ‘I like that tree because it’s got lots of flowers around it and you can just sit there if you want to be by yourself. I sometimes like to be by myself … I like listening out for the animals all around and trying to spot them … I like making the most of the quiet.’

This magical landscape encounter searching for elves in a woodland promoted enquiry into natural places that was underpinned by imagination, physical movement, use of the senses, wonder, intrigue and uncertainty. The children were not forced to engage with the quest but were invited to engage with these
opportunities to connect story, nature and place experience. These stories and scenarios were relevant to the local landscape and folklore. By opening the children’s imaginations to the unforeseen forces of the natural world it may be possible to restore an ecological dimension to children’s learning.

Pre-Service Teachers’ Encounters With Nature

We suggest that similar learning adventures for pre-service teachers, in the natural world, have the potential to unlock, to awaken and to make explicit, tacit values that can be masked by more formal training activities. Witt and Clarke (2013) describe the experiences and responses of final year undergraduate primary education students (science and geography specialists) and their tutors, from the University of Winchester, England, on a day’s field visit to the rural village of Selborne. This was a shared experience that captured student playfulness, explored possibilities of place in a cross-curricular context, and developed student and tutor ideas about curriculum making. Together, they experienced ‘embodied and storied encounters with nature’s places’ (Payne, 2010, p. 295). A dialogue occurred between tutors, students and the natural environment, for ‘to know the language of landscape is to see, smell, taste, hear and feel landscape as a symphony of complex harmonies’ (Spirn, 1998, p. 22). The place listened, spoke and watched in a spirit of reciprocity. The encounters encouraged the students to adopt a respectful approach to children and the environment. The students ‘saw trees and they climbed them, they jumped in rivers, they saw leaves and they threw them, and they played on tree swings’ (Witt & Clarke, 2012).

Louv (2005, p. 164) suggests that ‘the most effective way to connect our children to nature is to connect ourselves to nature’. Therefore, building on their curiosity for the natural world, the students were offered opportunities to rediscover a sense of joy, excitement and mystery (ibid.). They paused and dwelt in places for more than a fleeting moment (Payne & Wattchow, 2009) because … it takes time—loose, unstructured dreamtime—to experience nature in a meaningful way (Louv, 2005, p. 117). In doing so, students recognised the complexity of the natural world as ‘ever changing and ever growing’. One student described their relationship with nature as ‘mutual understanding’ and another expressed they felt ‘at one with nature’.

Communication was rich, multisensory and dialectic; the students acknowledged that the landscape communicated with them, one student writing poetically, ‘Leaves blowing, wind whispering, raindrops, birdsong’. The students noticed living shapes, for example, two trees whose trunks combined in letters reads, ‘HI’ (Figure 6.2).

Emotional responses suggested a state of well-being, ‘free, calm, peaceful and tranquil, happy and relaxed, content, still, alert’.

Emotional engagement not only nurtured possibilities for the development of more traditional ways of knowing in primary science and geography but, similar
to the children searching for trolls in the woodland, this experience also fostered a ‘remarkable opening to the students’ imaginative responses’ (Payne, 2010, p. 295). They designed ‘homes’ for woodland elves, which subsequently encouraged one science student to engage in creative writing: ‘Making the elves a home and being outside created a magical environment. I was so caught up in the awe and wonder of the place that I wanted to recreate this magic,’ and ‘It was an activity that inspired creativity, imagination and curiosity and could have great scientific value to children.’

The connections of story, nature and place were spontaneously and sensuously experienced by the students, who saw the notion of ‘ecological imagination’ (Payne, 2010, p. 297) as offering a positive and hopeful avenue for teaching the challenging issues of environmental stewardship. This was evident in the individuality of their emotional responses, which showed inextricable links between people, place and well-being. One described nature as ‘a close friend and comfort, a restful retreat from the daily routine’. These student teachers, in their openness to contexts for learning, recognised potentiality in ‘what is gained in the presence of the natural world’ (Louv, 2005, pp. 34–35). Auer (2008) recognises that experiential encounters in nature, usually underemphasised in adult-level outdoor fieldwork, are crucial to this human–nature nexus.
Analyses of outcomes for these students suggest both personal and professional growth. They experienced a reawakening to nature,

I found the trip to Selborne re-ignited my passion for the outdoors. Since growing older, I seem to have taken the outdoors for granted, not really realising the potential it had to offer and forgetting my past learning experiences. I think the unstructured exploration time we had at Selborne re-awakened my younger ‘outdoorsy’ self and I saw the wonder and variety of opportunities available in an outdoor environment.

We suggest that experiences in nature tell stories and nurture new forms of knowledge. These powerful ways of knowing are the roots of a reflective and critical eco-literacy that enables reading of the texts, artefacts and characters of nature. They are a lens for learning to navigate the world, expressed through multimodalities that allow young children to create and express meaning (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). But is it possible to truly ‘know’ nature … to solve nature’s ‘epistemological mystery’, for ‘although in one sense something with which we may on occasion feel ourselves to be intimately involved … nature is that which can never be fully known, intellectually possessed’ (Bonnett, 2007, p. 713).

For the youngest learners in the UK, from birth to five years, the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage sets the standards for learning, development and care. Within this curriculum, ‘Understanding the World’ is a ‘specific area of learning’ that involves ‘guiding children to make sense of their physical world and their community through opportunities to explore, observe and find out about people, places, technology and the environment’ (Department for Education, 2012, p. 5). We believe that experiences in the natural environment, indeed, build key understanding of the world. The framework requires practitioners:

- to plan for children to know about similarities and differences in relation to places, objects, materials and living things; to talk about the features of their own immediate environment and how environments might vary from one another; to make observations of animals and plants; to explain why some things occur, and to talk about changes

(ibid.)

Such skills are springboards for the development of early critical science and early critical geography.

In the UK, these are then further developed for children aged 5–11 by the National Curriculum for England (Department for Education, 2013, p. 136) which demands that science education develops ‘a sense of excitement and curiosity about natural phenomena’ and geography ‘a deep understanding … and fascination about the world’. Buckley (2006, p. 231) writes of ‘The Fairyland of
Science, full of worlds of wonder, waiting for learners to discover … which we may visit if we will … that lie quite close to us, hidden in every dew drop and gust of wind,’ and she invites us to ‘stretch out our hand and touch them with our wand of enquiry’. Experiential encounters in the natural world lie at the heart of ‘nature literacy’.

Training for pre-service and in-service teachers in the UK is regulated by a set of competencies, the Teachers’ Standards (Department for Education, 2011). How does experiential emergent fieldwork fit into such a framework? We suggest that immersive, emergent fieldwork for pre-service teachers contributes to and complements these standards. Wordsworth (1888) muses, ‘Let nature be your teacher.’ If nature is a sensate being (Abram, 1997), it will indeed help our students to see learning connections, to make curriculum decisions and to see potentialities. Engagement with the natural world is likely to lead to strong relationships with nature, essential to the conservation and protection of the environment. Playfulness and a ‘sense of giddiness’ (Tovey, 2007, p. 21) are elements that develop our identities as educators for a sustainable world.

**Implications for Children’s Critical Engagement With Environmental Issues**

There are those such as Bonnett (2004, 2007) or Bowers (2001, 2003) who have proposed a connection between ‘frame of mind’ and ‘action competence’. We see no automatic link between open opportunities for communication with place, the willingness on the part of students as they grow up to defend the systemic integrity of such places or the broader planetary ecosystem within which they are nested. However, we are confident that merely asking children to take an active part in the struggle against fracking or airport expansions, GM crop pilots, food speculation or any other issue of local or international concern without first enabling them to develop for themselves a clear sense of the intrinsic value of ecosystems will be a fruitless and thankless task, in addition to being potentially coercive. Critical and reflective eco-literacy is unlikely to spring from such an extrinsically based motivation.

Research by Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico, and Khazian (2004) made the connection between an individual’s association with nature and the attitudes he or she develops with a greater association with nature resulting in a concern that stretches beyond the individual. ‘Those who associate themselves with the natural environment tend to hold more biospheric attitudes’ (Ernst & Theimer, 2011, p. 580). In our experience, there is no epidemic of ‘nature deficit disorder’, but there are plenty of children who remain innocent, unknowing and unattached in relation to nature. A critical and reflective approach to environments cannot grow on the basis of a shallow and naïve relationship, and a re-engagement with places is a necessary condition for its growth. For younger children, associating with natural environments means finding the wonder and the magic in them. Our rather
direct evocation of the ‘spirits’ of a place helps to make that association a personal one, one which both informs and strengthens bonds and overcomes nature-naivety. For us, children are most likely to come to the defence of environments if they have that personal affiliation, something like solidarity with the elves and trolls who inhabit it, and this way a lasting nature-literacy is developed.

**CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMON CORE**

I use the speaking/listening standards from the CCS along with some reading standards, from the third grade.

Student Learning Activities: interpreted poetic text; interpreted riddle; engaged in large group and small group discussion, responding to questions from teacher; invited to ask questions related to their inquiries; listened to the sounds of nature; read/interpreted folklore and nature stories.

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.2** Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.5** Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.7** Explain how specific aspects of a text’s illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.1c** Ask questions to check understanding of information presented, stay on topic, and link their comments to the remarks of others.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.1d** Explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.2** Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.3** Ask and answer questions about information from a speaker, offering appropriate elaboration and detail.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.4** Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking clearly at an understandable pace.
COMMENTARY (FROM GUEST REVIEWER, SUE ANN BOTTOMS)

What I appreciate most about the approach that the authors take in this chapter is that rather than focusing on a deficit that children may have in connection to the environment they instead describe an innocence or naivety that children bring to their approach to the natural world. This perspective becomes not a problem to fix but an opportunity for early childhood educators. Building on this naivety, early childhood educators can create experiences for children to explore and engage in the wonders of the natural world. It can be an invitation to remove the borders between school science and the science of the natural world; to immerse children in the “magic” of the environment as a place of discovery and wonder. While one might question the approach of studying the natural world through the creation of a magical world as a blurring of science, a closer look at what the children gained from these experiences would suggest otherwise. In examples presented by the authors, the children are making observations, asking questions, collecting data, engaging in discourse around their discoveries, and sharing their findings with others, skills that are all included in the Next Generation Science Standards. Clearly, situating learning in the natural world provides young children and early childhood educators with the access and opportunity to develop these foundational scientific practices.

Note

1 With its 3.7 million members, a formidable organisation.

References


Kim Huber collaborated with Christine Leland and Jerome Harste in teaching critical literacy to her white, rural first-grade students. Kim was a novice at doing this type of teaching. It was a very successful experience for both her students and her. Both of them learned much, and you will read of the extraordinary learning gains by the students, including their development as ‘critical analysts.’ Kim initially was ambivalent about engaging her white rural students in the study of racism. Would these young students be developmentally and culturally ready to explore racism, given their age, their race, the white rural setting of their lives, and the fact that the trade books used to teach the unit depicted events long ago and far away? What do you think?

When Kim Huber finally decided to read *The Lady in the Box* (McGovern, 1997) to her first graders, she was not convinced that they would get much out of a book about homelessness. She wondered what they would think about the main character; a woman who was attempting to survive the winter living in a cardboard box. In some ways, Kim was also in a box at that time, but her box was conceptual; it caused her to think about literacy and what was appropriate for first-grade children in specific and somewhat narrow ways. This box positioned her to choose “happy” books to read at story time and to focus book discussions more on story elements like beginning, middle, and end than on more abstract topics like equity and social justice.

One group of teachers involved in this school–university research collaboration worked in suburban and rural schools while the other group consisted of
urban teachers from the Indianapolis Public Schools. Kim joined the urban teachers since she was geographically closer to them, but initially felt out of place since she taught in a rural setting and had no racial diversity in her classroom. Many of the books being explored by the urban teachers focused on racism, and Kim wondered if her white students would be able to connect to these stories. She listened with interest to what other teachers in the study group were saying about their experiences with the books, but she was not sure they would mean as much to her students. It was with some apprehension that she began reading social-issues-oriented books to her first graders late in the fall.

This chapter traces Kim’s preliminary exploration of critical literacy and shares her conclusions. While she initially worried that her students would not be able to make personal connections to stories that addressed topics like homelessness, racism, and war, what she discovered was that they made stronger connections to these books than to the “happy books” that she usually read. And while she was not surprised that their awareness of social issues showed considerable growth when she started to read books that focused on these topics, she did not expect to find that the children would start to treat each other with more compassion and understanding. She was also surprised to find that they put considerably more effort into their written and artistic responses, took on multiple perspectives, and made lots of intertextual connections when they were reacting to these books. She had many questions to consider: What made books like *The Lady in the Box* so different for these children? Could it be that her classroom became a different place when she started sharing the social issues books with her children at story time? These questions and many others fueled Kim’s inquiry into the role that critical literacy might be playing in the evolving culture of her classroom.

**Your Cultural Niche Matters**

“Culture is never static” because “the belief systems and practices associated with cultural groups are always under negotiation with new generations” (Lee, 2003, p. 4). As a result, it is important that “educational researchers understand the cultural niches in which young people develop” (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003, p. 6). Formal and informal preschools and primary schools constitute some of the most salient cultural niches in which young people begin the process of becoming literate. It is in settings like Kim Huber’s first-grade classroom that children expand their understanding of the purposes of literacy and begin to see how literacy relates to their interactions with others. The instructional approaches and the culture that children experience in these settings play a major role in shaping their emerging identities as cultural and literate beings.

Not all cultural niches are equal in terms of the experiences they provide for young children. In reporting the findings from longitudinal case studies of children’s literacy development in early childhood and primary school (Comber & Hill, 2000; Hill, Comber, Louden, Reid, & Rivalland, 1998), Barbara Comber
(2003) identifies “several worrying signs” (p. 13) that emerge from analysis of these data. While the studies suggest that most children do become proficient in their ability to make meaning from text, they also suggest that even in preschool and the earliest years of formal schooling, different children are acquiring qualitatively different repertoires of literacy practice. While some children are involved in communicative practices that engage them in production, analysis, and response, others appear to be experiencing “piecemeal recycled literacies of replication and repetition” (p. 13). Common activities in the latter group include filling in blanks, copying letters or words and coloring in pictures. This is problematic because it means that some children are beginning their academic careers with a limited and ultimately dysfunctional view of what literacy is for and what it can do in the world.

What is missing in these replication and repetition settings is the involvement of young learners in deeper processes of critique and analysis. In contrast, children who experience a critical approach to literacy learn to “read between the lines” and generate alternative explanations regarding the author’s intent. They are encouraged to take an active role in questioning both the texts themselves and the beliefs and personal experiences they bring to them.

….The gap between the instruction that many children receive and the need for greater cultural understanding is unfortunate given the fact that our society is becoming increasingly more diverse. James A. Banks (2003) argues that the world’s most serious problems do not exist because people cannot read. These problems, he maintains, exist because people from different cultures, races, and religions have not been able to work together to address multinational issues like global warming, the AIDS epidemic, poverty, racism, sexism, and war. Banks recommends that schools take on the role of helping children “use knowledge to take action that will make the world a just place in which to live and work” (p. 18). To prepare literate individuals for the 21st century, we need to do more than teach them how to decode and comprehend texts. What is needed now is a critical understanding of language as a cultural resource that can be used to challenge or maintain systems of domination (Janks, 2000).

What kind of teaching can help young children to develop this type of critical competence? Kim Huber used story time as a way to begin opening up spaces for building critical literacy awareness in her classroom. Since she was participating in a funded research project, she kept a journal and noted how the use of these books in her classroom appeared to be affecting her students.

Evolving Attitudes and Skills

Awareness of Social Issues: Asking New Questions

One of the first patterns Kim noticed was an increase in the children’s awareness of social issues. After reading The Lady in the Box, she wrote an entry entitled “Critical
Out of the Box: First-Grade Classrooms

Literacy Impact May at First Appear Minimal, But Don’t Let Looks Deceive You into Thinking Nothing Has Happened.” This entry related the experience of her students in participating in a school-wide project to collect canned goods.

Our school had been collecting food items for the local food pantry since just before Thanksgiving. Unfortunately the emphasis was to collect more than the other schools in our district so we could retain our title of being the most responsive to the needs of others. We had reminders each morning and right before going home for the day. There was even a contest set up to see which class could bring in the most items. My children had been bringing in items since that first day, and would often mention they thought we would win. When they made these statements, I countered with comments that had to do with how many people we were able to help with these items. But it just didn’t seem to get through to the children.

Most of what they brought came in during that first week. We had collected 90 items and the children were telling me their parents said they couldn’t bring anything else. Then I read the book *The Lady in the Box*. The very next day, the children came in loaded down with more items. No one made a comment about winning, but instead they talked of how the food items could help others. What really amazed me was that it had taken fifteen days to collect 90 items, but in just three days, we went on to collect a total of 205 items. What was even more impressive to me was the change in the children’s attitudes. Instead of looking to win, they were now focused on helping others.

(Journal, 12-02)

Kim noticed further evidence of the children’s growing awareness of social issues in January 2003 after reading *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991) to the class. This was another book about homelessness and featured a father and son who lived in an airport.

On the one-hundredth day of school, we did our traditional writing on the topic of “If I had one hundred dollars.” Sixty-six percent of the class wrote the usual responses such as, “If I had $100, I would biu me a hors. I alwas wuntit a hors” and “If I had $100, I would by a Voltswagin jetu. Win I groe up I would praktis driving it.” The surprising thing was that the issue of homelessness popped up in 33% of their responses. One child wrote, “If I had $100, I would give pepele mony to by a hause. I wont to be nise to other pepel that don’t have homes.” Another wrote, “If I had $100 I would give the homels pepol my mone because I like to give.” A third child wrote, “If I had $100, I would by them, stuff, for the homeless people.”

(Journal, 01-03)

In addition to expressing a desire to help homeless people like the ones in the books Kim had shared with them, the children also began to ask questions about
why these people were homeless in the first place. They noted that the characters in both books used to have homes but in each case, something happened to change this situation. Dorrie (The Lady in the Box) lost her home when she lost her job, and the boy in the airport (Fly Away Home) lost his home when his mother died. Many of the children were surprised and upset to learn that people could lose their homes for something that “wasn’t their fault.” Some made connections to times in their own lives when someone lost a job or a working family member died or moved away. One child argued that people need to have homes while they’re looking for new or better jobs and another asked why other people didn’t help them find homes. Phrases like “it’s not fair” and “how are people supposed to live?” came up many times during the discussions of these books.

**Getting Along With Others**

Kim also noted that her students seemed to be getting along with each other better than other groups she had taught in the past. After reading Freedom Summer (Wiles, 2001), she made the following entry in her journal:

One thing, which may at first glance seem insignificant, is how well my students get along with each other. This is my seventh year teaching and always by February, they are griping at each other over trivial issues. … Whatever it is, it disrupts the harmony and distracts us from the business at hand. This year has been different from any other year that I have experienced. While other teachers complained about the nitpicking behavior going on in their rooms, I had to sit in silence because I was not experiencing this with my students. When I mentioned that we haven’t had these kinds of problems, they looked at me like I was trying to cover something up.

I didn’t totally realize the significance until our school counselor came into our room to talk about choices we make when handling disagreements that children have with each other. When she asked for examples from my children, they looked at her and waited with raised eyebrows. She waited and then prompted them for examples. “What do you do if you lose your pencil and you need it to do your work?” Their response, “Ask a neighbor to borrow one.” She did not get the response that she expected and went on to explain how children have minor disagreements. My children looked from her to me, and back again. That was when it struck me how different the atmosphere in my room was this year ….

(Journal, 02-03)

*Freedom Summer* tells the story of how some white people in one southern town decided to fill up their public swimming pool with tar rather than allow black people to swim there after segregation became illegal. Kim reported that her children were “visibly shocked” when they realized what was going on with the pool being filled in. They brought up the issue of fairness several times and
repeatedly asked why some people thought they were better than others. They were angry that these people refused to share the pool and were amazed that they would rather close it down for good than let black people swim there. Kim noted that the children engaged in numerous conversations about race after she read this book, and many concluded that it was “mean” to treat people unfairly because of race. Kim hypothesized that books like *Freedom Summer* opened a space for her children to “figure out where someone else is coming from” and encouraged them to “look for solutions that were fair instead of getting involved in useless power struggles” (Interview, 03-04).

**Quality of Children’s Writing**

By February, Kim noticed changes in the quality of her children’s writing when they were responding to books in the critical text set. At this point she read *So Far From the Sea* (Bunting, 1998), a story that recounts one Japanese American family’s experiences with the horrors of internment camps during the second world war. Her journal entry documents her observations:

> One of the things I have been really surprised about when I use critical literacy books with my children is how they respond to them. They write more than usual if I ask them to write when they respond.

*(Journal, 02-03)*

While Kim did not collect samples to show the quality of her students’ writing for a non-critical book, much can be inferred from the samples she collected after reading critical books. What becomes immediately obvious is the amount of text generated by these first graders. And the extensive writing was not done by a handful of students, but by all of them. A representative example is the set of papers that Kim collected after reading *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991). She invited the children to write down any questions they would like to ask the boy who lived in the airport and to say what they would do to help if they could do anything. The children generated numerous questions and most of them filled the entire side of the paper. They also did not skimp on words in describing what they would do to help. One child who was identified by Kim as a typically reluctant writer generated three thoughtful questions and ended by saying: “I wold let them live with me if he was cold I wold let him cuvr up in my worm bed and win he is tird he can sleep in my bed.” When responding to a book that he thought was important, this child was clearly willing to write.

**Quality of Children’s Art**

Kim noticed a similar type of energy with the children’s artistic endeavors when they were responding to books in the critical text set. She made the following
observations about the drawings that were generated in response to *So Far from the Sea* (Bunting, 1998).

What was quite apparent with this activity was the amount of effort they put into their drawings. Usually, they are just drawing to get an assignment done and quickly slap any old thing down. Not with these drawings. My room was completely silent while they worked. They waited patiently to have a chance to look more closely at the book, and their drawings were phenomenal. They added details in a way that I never see in any of their other work. I observed a number of children drawing, and then erasing and drawing again, sometimes several times until they got it the way they wanted. When I took their drawings to meet with the Peace Collaboration group, they were surprised at the quality of the drawings and asked if they always produced work like this. I had to reply that this was an exception. Occasionally one or two children will take their time and create a detailed drawing, but never the whole class as it was with this set of drawings. Is it because they take their work seriously since they are dealing with topics and issues that seem adult to them?

(Journal, 02-03)

Figure 7.1 shows four children’s responses to *So Far from the Sea* (Bunting, 1998), a book about the internment of Japanese-American citizens during World War 2.

The children’s attentiveness to re-creating details like the high fences, barbed wire, and guns documents Kim’s observation that they put considerable time and effort into these drawings. Kim also noted that the conversations about this book were ongoing for many weeks and served as a scaffold for pushing the children’s thinking and for giving them a platform to share their thoughts. She recalled that when children wanted to make a point about another unfair situation, they frequently made references to the Japanese internment camp and how armed soldiers had come to take a little boy in a Cub Scout uniform from his home. They criticized the actions of the soldiers and empathized with the innocent child who had not done anything to deserve this treatment. In this case, art was a useful sign system for helping to develop children’s critical awareness.

**Seeing a Bigger Picture: Inter-textual Connections and Multiple Perspectives**

Kim also observed that book discussions in her class were beginning to be characterized by the inclusion of inter-textual connections and references to multiple perspectives. Children were bringing up other titles and other authors to help them situate every new book she shared. In April, she addressed this topic in her journal.
Today, we read *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson. As I showed the children the book, one of them mentioned that the same author wrote *Visiting Day*, the book we read about a child visiting her father in prison. They immediately settled down and gave me their full attention.

More inter-textual connections followed as Kim began to read the book aloud.

That summer the fence that stretched through our town seemed bigger. We lived in a yellow house on one side of it. White people lived on the other. And Mama said, ‘Don’t climb over that fence when you play.’ She said it wasn’t safe.

Kim noted that the children immediately seized on the words “it wasn’t safe.” She wondered if this related directly to their exposure to other books addressing
race relation issues. Even on the first page, they had already identified the threat as white people. One child made a connection to Rosa Parks, the woman who was told to give her seat on the bus to a white man (Miller, 1998). He thought this story was going to be similar. Others brought up the books, *Martin’s Big Words* (Rappaport, 2001) and *Freedom Summer* (Wiles, 2001) (Journal. 04–03).

Other books that Kim shared with her children seemed to invite conversations about multiple perspectives and how individuals might see the same events differently. *Stars in the Darkness* (Joosse, 2002) relates what happens to a family when the older brother gets involved in a gang. The story shows how three characters (the mother, the older brother and the younger brother) see the situation from their own unique perspectives. Kim discussed the idea of multiple perspectives with her children and then invited them to draw each character and write what that person was thinking about during the story.

Figure 7.2 shows one child’s example and suggests that he was able to sort out the different views of the characters. He reported that Mama was thinking about Richard’s gang activities, little brother was thinking the same thing (and crying, according to the picture) and Richard was thinking that he didn’t want anyone to know what he was doing.

Kim also shared a note from the author with her children. This note, which comes at the end of the book, explains what gangs offer to kids like Richard—a sense of belonging, a feeling of security and sometimes even basic necessities like food and clothing. She reported that the children discussed this note at length and that several made a connection between poverty and the attraction of gangs. One child hypothesized that Richard probably wouldn’t have been in a gang in the first place if his family had enough money to buy “important stuff like food, clothes and toys.” Although this child did not interrogate the underlying societal structures that produce and maintain poverty, his comment suggests that he was beginning to understand how poverty positions people and limits their choices.

![Graphical representation of children's responses showing multiple perspectives](image-url)
Along similar lines, Kim asked the children to imagine what the swans and the peacocks in *Feathers and Fools* (Fox, 1989) were feeling on the inside and the outside as they were deciding whether they would go to war with each other. Figure 7.3 shows two children’s responses.

These examples suggest that the children were able to “read between the lines” and recognize how deceiving appearances can be. They looked beyond the brag-gadocio and militaristic posturing of the swans and peacocks and concluded that fear was driving their destructive behavior.

**Disrupting the Normal**

As the school year drew to a close, Kim reflected on what had transpired in her classroom after sharing a number of the critical picture books with her children.

In my wildest dreams, I would never have thought my students would have come so far in just one school year. At the beginning of the year, they simply saw a book as being for their enjoyment, like a Disney experience. They now look critically at texts, looking for clues into the meaning the author intended. They have examined books for hidden assumptions and have looked at how the readers are being positioned through these texts.

*(Journal, 04-03)*

---

**FIGURE 7.3** Children’s multiple perspectives to *Feathers and Fools*

He reported, “The swans were mean on the outside (and) they were going to fight.”

But turning the paper over reveals that this child was aware of another perspective as well: “The swans were scared in the inside (and) they didn’t know what to do.”

Another child observed, “They think they are tough on the outside.”

“But they aren’t. They’re scared.”
An example of this type of critical analysis occurred as the children studied an illustration in The Other Side (Woodson, 2001) that shows the two main characters (a black girl and a white girl) with their mothers as they passed by each other in town. One child pointed out how the two girls and their mothers were all wearing the same kind of clothing (shiny black shoes, white gloves, and “fancy dresses”). Another child surmised that the author [illustrator] probably did this on purpose to make people see how similar they were. “If she wanted us to think that they were really different, she wouldn’t have done that.” Other examples from the same book focused on the author’s [illustrator’s] purpose in making the young black girl look “strong and powerful” in the picture after the rain stopped and in making the white girl look “sad and lonely” as she sat on the fence at the beginning of the book.

Kim also considered the role these books were playing in acquainting her rural children with issues of diversity that often seemed invisible in their mono-cultural setting.

Without exposure to race, how would my children ever get past the differences to see what is similar? And in a small, white town, they might be adults before they know someone who is black. By that time, after going so long, it will be hard to tear down the fences of mistrust of someone who looks different. How much more important it becomes in a rural area like this to expose the children to other groups.

(Kim’s observations stress the importance of encouraging children to interrogate what they see as commonplace or “normal.” In an all-white community, it can become “normal” to assume that people of color are somehow “different” and maybe even “dangerous.” An example of this dominant discourse was shared by a student teacher we once had who was momentarily stunned when a child in her classroom stated during a literature discussion, “All black people carry guns and kill people.” When the student teacher suggested that this might be a stereotype and not true, the child responded adamantly that it was true because his parents told him so (Leland & Harste, 2003).

**Possibilities for Taking Action**

The Other Side is a picture book that turns the tables and challenges the dominant discourse. Suddenly it’s the black people who are in danger and the white people who are the dangerous ones. What is significant here is how quickly Kim’s children picked up on this new perspective. Several examples of their writing make this point. One child wrote, “They thought that the white people would kill the black people. They can’t sit on the fence.” Two other children wrote, “They don’t want their children to go on the other side because the
white people might kill the black people” and “One’s mom didn’t want her to go over the fence because she said ‘There’s danger.’ The danger was the other side. The white people were the danger.” It would have been more predictable to find children growing up in a homogeneous white community reflecting the stereotypical view that African Americans are to be feared. The Other Side offered these children the perspective that black people sometimes live in fear of dangerous white people.

It is also important to note that the children responded to this story by generating ideas for improving the situation between the neighbors. One student wrote, “They could play together if the fence got knocked down” and another predicted that they will all become friends once that happens: “When they knock the fence down, the black and white people can play together and their moms can meet each other and they can give their phone number and they will have a lot of fun.” Clearly these children saw the fence as an obstacle, but they appeared to understand that communication was the real issue. We can hypothesize that their life experiences have led them to conclude that meeting people, exchanging phone numbers and interacting (“playing together”) are important steps in forming positive social relationships. Just as the swans and peacocks in Feathers and Fools (Fox, 1989) needed to get over their fear of difference in order to appreciate each others’ talents and skills, children and parents also need to get over their fears of people who are perceived as different or “other.” These fears might be common and “normal,” but they need to be challenged.

Stories that disrupt what is seen as normal are important. In this case, a picture book experience (The Other Side) provided an opportunity for Kim’s children to see the world through a different lens. It allowed them to look at race issues through the eyes of an African American child and to consider the role that white people have played in keeping the two races apart and on unequal footing. Their idea of knocking the fence down and playing together demonstrates that they were paying attention to their own personal and cultural resources and thinking about how to take social action to make the world a better place for all children. It can be argued that this stance was not achieved after hearing one story or discussing one instance of marginalization. Kim engaged her first graders in critical conversations about important social issues for the better part of a whole school year. She herself disrupted commonplace teaching norms by enlarging the literacy curriculum of her first grade to the point where it included more than decoding and comprehension. The addition of books that addressed difficult social issues added a new dimension that had not been in her classroom previously and is not often found in work with young children.

In reality, Kim had challenged two traditional views that tend to be the dominant discourse in both schools and the larger culture. First, she challenged the view that literacy is mainly a question of decoding and making meaning.
Second, she challenged what many teachers and parents perceive as common sense regarding appropriate subject matter for story time with young children. This view positions children as needing protection from complexity and unpleasant topics. As a result, the common sense approach leads teachers and parents to choose stories that have simple plot lines and “happily ever after” endings that tie up all loose ends. The thinking is that these stories are appropriate for children because they do not introduce multifaceted issues that might be too abstract for them to understand. This view of children’s capacity to understand difficult issues has been challenged by researchers like Corsaro (1997) and Dyson (1993) who suggest that children often use play activities to address complex issues that concern them. While we might wish that children did not have to deal with issues like racism, poverty, and war, the fact of the matter is that many children are deeply concerned about these and other difficult issues when they walk into our classrooms. Ignoring what they need help to understand and deal with is not productive or humane.

A Happy Ending?

Since the dominant national discourse on literacy acquisition appears to be bogged down in the first two resources identified by Luke and Freebody (1997), it is hard to imagine a happy ending for this piece. But maybe that is to be expected, given the fact that happy endings typically do not occur in either the books in the critical literacy text set or in life in general. As Kim wrote in her journal,

> These children do not all have tidy happy endings in their lives. Using critical texts opens their eyes and my own to world issues. This helps to create understanding and provides connections for kids whose lives do not fit what they think is normal—such as the family of four with both parents and a dog in the backyard.

*(Journal, 03-03)*

Even so, there is still something hopeful that emerges from this text—the validation that individual teachers can still make a difference. And like Kim, they might get motivated to begin stepping out of their own instructional boxes. For while many classroom reading programs are now micro-managed to the point of becoming scripts that teachers are asked to “stand and deliver,” the time-honored institution of story time leaves a tiny chink in the armor. Books that are read to children can also be discussed with them. The topics of these books can be revisited through writing and art. Kim’s story shows how teachers can take small steps as they begin to introduce children to new perspectives. Without causing too much of a ruckus, critical literacy can start seeping into the culture of a classroom. Children and teachers alike can question the assumptions that drive what goes
on in their classroom, their school and their community. There are mandates in schools today that make even the most dedicated and experienced teachers among us think about changing careers. If there is any hope to be found, it might well be in the realization that we can still create cultural niches where the children (and we ourselves) can develop as critically literate beings who are going to keep trying to make the world a better place.

**CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMON CORE**

I use the first-grade standards for reading and writing to make connections to student learning, including students’ use of art/drawing as a way to respond to reading. I consider their artistic responses to be a form of writing.

Student Learning Activities: much response to literature by writing, discussion and artwork; also making inter-textual connections as well as examining texts from multiple perspectives

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.1** Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.2** Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.3** Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.5** Explain major differences between books that tell stories and books that give information, drawing on a wide reading of a range of text types.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.6** Identify who is telling the story at various points in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.7** Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.1** Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or name the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason for the opinion, and provide some sense of closure.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.3** Write narratives in which they recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.8** With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.
This piece provides such powerful evidence that young children (6-year-olds!) are ready to make sense of difficult subjects, like homelessness and racism. At an age earlier than Kim’s students, certainly, children develop schemata for what is fair and unfair. Thinking back to Herb Kohl’s comments at the end of the Introduction (this volume), even our youngest students yearn for complexity and authenticity in school curricular experience. No doubt, Kim’s students made mature sense of these texts very well, and students’ high engagement was reflected in the extraordinary learning outcomes.

I am especially impressed with Kim’s critical literacy work with rural white first graders. Both the students’ grade level and cultural setting may deter or inhibit some teachers from teaching critical literacy, understandably concerned about the sensibilities of conservative parents, colleagues or community members. Certainly, in the absence of like-minded colleagues, exploring any new approach to teaching is challenging. Kim was fortunate to have two critical literacy collaborators, Chris Leland and Jerome Harste. Kim and her collaborators appeared to implement critical literacy without ‘push back’ from the parents or other teachers in the school, and I wonder if this reflects Kim’s longevity in the school district and the trust she’d developed with the community and colleagues.

Kim’s descriptions show her students using resources two, three, four from Luke and Freebody’s (1999; see Introduction, this volume) literacy framework. Students continuously were engaged in inferential response to the readings; they used texts as invitations to engage in service work; and they vigorously challenged the unfairnesses, tensions and author decisions throughout. It is a reasonable inference that Kim was thorough in addressing the first resource, which includes decoding/phonics knowledge. But, perhaps, more important than students’ work doing all ‘four resources’ are their expressions of care and compassion for others.

Children’s Books Cited


References


Danielle, the teacher, initiated the study of social justice through the use of trade books, followed by critical analysis at a broad conceptual level, such as a consideration of author bias and the study of stereotypes. After reading of racism in *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson, Danielle asks the important question, How are things the same now, and how are they different? This question leads students to understand that racism continues, and that the egregious racism of the Jim Crow era has only morphed into more subtle forms in recent years. So when we read stories of Martin Luther King, Dolores Huerta, Indian boarding schools and the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and earlier, for example, do you think it is important that these texts also acknowledge that issues of racism and poverty still do exist? And if you do point out that these problems still persist, do you then engage young students in the study of racism and poverty as it exists now?

Teacher read-alouds are planned oral readings of children’s book. They are a vital part of literacy instruction in primary classrooms. Teachers can use read-alouds to develop children’s background knowledge, stimulate their interest in high-quality literature, increase their comprehension skills, and foster critical thinking. While reading, teachers model strategies that children can use during their own independent reading.

This chapter describes read-alouds that feature critical literature. Critical literacy literature consists of high-quality children’s books that prompt children to think and talk about social issues that impact their daily lives. The chapter includes a rationale for the importance of using children’s literature and read-alouds in
primary classrooms; a description of critical literacy and the kinds of children’s books appropriate for critical literacy read-alouds; and an example of a critical literacy read-aloud in a first-grade classroom by one of the authors.

**Critical Literacy Read-Alouds: Establishing the Basics**

Books play an important role in children social and academic development. Reading high-quality books increases children’s overall language competence, and the process of reading, listening, questioning, and responding to a story provides a foundation for reflective and critical thinking (Pressley, 2006). Children emulate their teachers, and they are eager to read the books their teachers read (Cunningham, 2005). Reading aloud from high-quality literature supports primary children’s literacy development in multiple ways. Including the reading and discussion of critical literacy texts can add even more learning opportunities for young children.

Every read-aloud should include high-quality children’s literature, but not every read-aloud has to feature a critical literacy text. In fact, texts are not critical in and of themselves; it is the conversations that take place around the texts that qualify as critical. Teachers initiate critical conversations through the questions they pose. Such conversations move beyond traditional who, what, when, and where questions to a deeper understanding that goes beyond the print on the page.

Before developing critical questions, a teacher must settle on a book for the read-aloud. Traditional children’s books seldom address social issues of interest or importance to children, making the task of finding the right book a challenge. Harste (2000) believes that in order to have conversations about social issues, the books a teacher selects should meet one or more of the following criteria:

- explore differences rather than make them invisible;
- enrich understandings of history and life by giving voice to those traditionally silenced or marginalized;
- show how people can begin to take action on important social issues;
- explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people as ‘others’;
- don’t provide ‘happily ever after’ endings for complex social problems.

Books that meet such criteria lend themselves to critical read-alouds by providing opportunities for children to critique the text and question the status quo.

The questions a teacher asks will depend on the text selected, the children in the class, the values of the school and community, and individual experiences. Simpson (1996) offers several suggestions to help teachers preparing for read-alouds. She suggests teaching children that
characters are not real but (are) constructed by authors and that stories are not reality but selective versions of it;
• authors lead the reader to respond to the story in particular ways through use of language, point of view, and other conventions, and that children can generate alternatives to authors’ perspectives;
• authors leave gaps in stories, so readers can look for what is missing and explore why; and
• authors write for particular audiences and assume that these audiences have specific cultural knowledge and share certain values.

Primary-age (and younger) children are able to participate in discussions based on teacher’ use of critical questions. Chafel and her colleagues have shown that young children can learn to make critical connections to read-aloud texts and respond to such questions as, “Who is telling the story?” “What do you think that person wants us to think?” or “Why do you think the character is poor?” (Chafel et al., 2007). When children practice asking critical questions about the text, they are developing reading and thinking skills that can lead to powerful insights into how texts work, how readers can become more aware of their place in the reading process, and where they fit into the social world that surrounds them.

A Teacher’s Critical Read-Aloud

This section outlines steps in planning and implementing read-alouds with critical literacy literature, using Danielle’s description of an actual read-aloud she planned around a children’s book, The Other Side. The read-aloud took place in an urban first-grade class.

Select a Book

The book I chose was The Other Side, by Jacqueline Woodson, a story about two young girls, one Black and one White, who are living through an era of high racial tension. The children live on opposite sides of a rail fence. The fence serves as a dividing line, yet allows them to see one another. The young girls don’t understand why race brings conflict or why they are not allowed to cross the fence. Ultimately, they decide to break societal norms and find a way to play together.

Preview the Book

After deciding to use The Other Side, I pre-read the book, looking for spots where I could bring out critical points inside the story and where I might be able to spark children’s conversation about the racial divides symbolized by the fence. For example, there is a scene in the story when the two girls are in town with their mothers.
As they pass one another, the girls want to make contact—but their mothers pull them apart. I teach in a multicultural classroom, and I know the children in my class have had experiences with racial separation. I planned to ask them how they think the girls felt and why they think the mothers responded the way they did.

During my pre-reading, I also looked for words that might be unfamiliar to the children. I identified vocabulary in the story to introduce during a mini-lesson prior to the read-aloud (for example, polite, stare, partners), and I made a note of words introduced in previous lessons, such as segregation, race, and prejudice, that we would review before the read-aloud.

**Develop Critical Questions to Use During the Read-Aloud and Post Them in the Book**

During my pre-reading, I used sticky notes to make the points I wanted to ask the children about during the read-aloud. I phrased my questions to elicit children’s own questions, further their understanding of the issues in the book, and encourage the children to make connections between themselves and the text. Some of these questions were, “Why do you think that one of the Black girls said no when the White girl asked if she could play? How do you think the girls felt when this happened, and why?” and “What would you have said, and why?”

**Conduct a Mini-Lesson to Activate Children’s Prior Knowledge**

Before the read-aloud, I led a mini-lesson during which children recalled Martin Luther King Jr. Day and the class lessons about segregation and racial issues. We also talked about some of the other Jacqueline Woodson books we had read—for example, *Our Gracie Aunt* and *Visiting Day*. I quickly previewed my list of unfamiliar vocabulary from *The Other Side*. We talked about some of the things that adults do not allow children to do and why they thought they were not supposed to do these things. The children talked about strangers, stealing, and disrespectful behaviors. Then we discussed why their families don’t allow them to do certain things and what happens when they do them.

**Do a Picture Walk**

After the mini-lesson, we did a picture walk, beginning with the cover. Looking at the cover art, the class made predictions about what the title meant, and then we began to look through the pages. We talked about where and when the story might have taken place. As we moved through the illustrations, the children began to notice differences in the characters, particularly the emotions displayed on their faces. I encouraged the children to put together a story in their minds before we read the words.
Read the Story, Stopping to Discuss the Questions

As we read through the story, I asked the questions on the sticky notes, and the children brought out connections to their own lives and to other texts. They talked among themselves, and asked their own questions about the characters and events in the story. For example, they asked, “Why can’t they play together?” and “Why doesn’t the little White girl have friends to play with?” One child asked, “Why don’t they just take the fence down?”

Once we had read and discussed the story, I asked the children to think about why the author wrote it and what it means. We talked about how parts of the story are the same and different from how things are today. I concluded by inviting the children to write about how the events and characters in the story related to their own experiences. Later, the children shared what they had written, and we continued discussing the story and what they could learn from it.

In Summary

All primary teachers should share engaging, interesting, well-written children’s literature with their classes. The benefits of read-aloud experiences for the literacy development of young children are well established, and including critical literacy literature read-alouds expands those benefits even more. Young children should be exposed to all kinds of high-quality literature and learn to think critically about all the texts they encounter. Every read-aloud does not have to be about a social concern that impacts the lives of primary-age children, but every child should have the opportunity to think critically about textual representations of the world.

CONNECTIONS TO THE CORE

I use the first-grade standards for the English Language Arts, with a focus on literature.

Student Learning Activities: learned new vocabulary; listened/discussed some literary text, answering inferential and creative questions; considered author bias; wrote a text-self narrative piece in response to the reading; and compared characters within the story

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.1 Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.2 Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.3 Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.6 Identify who is telling the story at various points in a text.
• **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.7** Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.
• **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.9** Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in stories.
• **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.1** Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or name the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason for the opinion, and provide some sense of closure.
• **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.5** With guidance and support from adults, focus on a topic, respond to questions and suggestions from peers, and add details to strengthen writing as needed.

**COMMENTARY**

This is an example of critical literacy that entails the analysis of bias in text. There is so much to like about Danielle’s teaching:

• Danielle’s posing discussion questions that are both text-dependent and text independent;
• her connection to some earlier lessons on segregation, race, Martin Luther King and also Woodson’s other books with related themes;
• and her use of both literary and expository text to teach the civil rights movement.

The chapter title uses the phrase, *Critical Literacy Literature*. However, it is the particular stance, or perspective, readers bring to text, or how readers use text to generate actions to solve social problems, that is the litmus test of critical literacy activity. For example, *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold (1991) is a story of an African-American girl who wants to own the ice cream factory, the George Washington Bridge and other objects in her life, and she pretends to fly around the city in her yearning for ownership of these things. I have had students who’ve interpreted this book as a lovely description of tenement and city life from the experience of an African-American girl who likes ice cream and is sad her father can’t get a job closer to home. However, other students have brought a critical lens to the story, by linking her yearning for power to the historic powerlessness of people of color.

I would suggest that texts, even those that explicitly describe very radical social justice actions, do not alone lead to readers’ critical analysis, although issue-oriented texts are certainly amenable to critical analysis. It all depends on the reader bringing a critical lens to the text, whether it be an aspirin bottle label or Wangari Maathai’s efforts to stop the clear-cutting of Kenyan forests in the 1980s. I invite you to consider critical literacy as a mindset, a way of looking at text: as inherently problematic and always subject to criticism.
References


EXTENSION

Texts that explicitly challenge students by presenting problems and issues from community life have been referred to as social issues books, multicultural literature, and international or global literature (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013). Some of these texts contain description of people taking action on behalf of social or environmental justice, like *Wangari’s Trees of Peace* (Winter, 2008). Even if the teacher does little to engage students in critical analysis of these texts, the explicit depiction of people doing critical actions has value and is instructive to students, by simply exposing students to images of social justice in action. However, when the teacher asks just the right questions to get students to consider multiple perspectives, the bias of the author, and the larger political context of the events, this moves the discussion and analysis into the realm of the ‘critical’.

The quality of the teacher’s questions are crucial when doing critical literacy, as it is in all teaching. Ideally, the questions are specific to the actual text under review. Of course, the usefulness of generic questions will depend on the text. Here are some generic ‘critical’ prompts (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2003):

- Whose viewpoint is expressed?
- How does the author want us to think?
- Whose voices are silenced, missing or discounted?
- How might alternative perspectives be represented?

When using critical questions (and all kinds of high-level thinking questions), I think we want to encourage students to ask their own ‘critical’ questions. Anne Simpson (1996) found that children, when given the freedom to respond spontaneously to text, would ask all kinds of questions and not necessarily critical ones. She maintained that we must value all the questions children ask, even if these move the discussion in non-critical directions. She found that children’s non-critical questions sometimes led to critical discussions (e.g., who’s missing, who has power, whose interests are being served?). She found the best discussion questions are the ones the children want to discuss. And in the lively discussions that students have, around their questions and teachers’ questions, the critical teacher can find spaces to nudge and incite students in “acquiring the language to talk critically about text” (Simpson, 1996, p. 125).

In the end, I think the most developmentally appropriate question opens with the phrase, “Why do you think …?” The challenge, then, is to listen to students, teach students to listen to each other, show them how
to use evidence from text to support their arguments, and also how to use evidence from multiple texts (activities that are the heart of the CCS). And, echoing Vivian Vasquez’ caveat in Chapter 1, we should pay attention to children’s interests and resist “over-schooling their interests and co-opting their interests thereby diminishing their pleasure with it.”
PART IIC
Applying Critical Functional Linguistics
This page intentionally left blank
Teaching all students but especially second language learners how to read grammatical features of language for author bias is crucial in any literacy program. Reading teachers historically have not been trained to teach this literacy resource, how specific grammatical wording reflects authorial bias which, in turn, relates to power relations. Each word, each phrase, has meaning, and the critical reader does the kind of close reading on the page in search of their multiple meanings. I invite the reader to consider the complexity and messiness of teaching social studies content and critical functional linguistics, together, in a social environment that is often hostile and inhospitable to immigrants and people of color.

Kim: Oh that’s too bad that they [the live crickets and anoles] came so early because Voyagers [literacy theme] and immigration [social studies topic] would’ve been perfect together.
Tish: I know and I wish we could switch it but they order them [anoles] from a company.
Kim: But maybe [Theme 6] Smart Solutions will go with immigration.
Kathryn: Well there are some collective nouns [on the ELD pacing chart], often that’s a part of history … like you say, instead of talking about individual people you talk about “The British …”
Tish: What are collective nouns?
Brad: I might have to go look that up!

This chapter begins with a story about the real-life complexities of teaching in an elementary school in the United States. In the brief conversation among
teachers above, the live anoles were arriving a few weeks too early to the third-grade classrooms, and no one wanted to risk having dead critters in the classroom. The science unit on life cycles *had* to precede the social studies unit on immigration and culture. Thus, the teachers Kim, Tish, and the team (including ELL specialist Helena, researcher Kathryn, student teacher Brad) had to be flexible and reorganize plans for the integration of English Language Development (ELD) standards and a social studies unit. With the goal of integrating English Language Development standards *and* content, neither area could be independently planned or stand-alone without affecting the other. Social studies could not be delayed a couple weeks without altering the use of the district’s ELD pacing chart. Part of the Smart Solutions theme on the ELD pacing chart was the English function *generalizing* and the form *collective nouns*. As university researcher, I (Kathryn) brought a functional linguistics perspective to this work. In the transcript that opens this chapter, I briefly explained the use of collective nouns by historians to focus on groups rather than individuals when describing historical events (Ciechanowski, 2012).

The focus of this chapter is to describe how functional linguistic analysis can be a tool for integrating language and content, how one teacher (Tish) taught linguistic analysis of social studies text to her students, and how our teacher-researcher team took up sociopolitical issues to engage in *critical* language analysis. In an era in which language development instruction tends to be isolated, delegated to specialists, and disconnected from content (Mize & Dantas-Whitney, 2007), this chapter shows how English language learning can be connected to academic content and also to the sociopolitical aspects of students’ lives. Furthermore, this chapter shows how the social studies unit on immigration and cultural diversity and the students’ playground conflicts were deeply intertwined with specific grammatical structures and language functions.

**Perspectives in the Literature**

Educators have explored how to teach language development and content to English language learners (ELLs) for decades (Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989). However, the trend in ELL teaching has a focus on the separate and measurable *explicit* instruction of English Language Development. The following sections explore what teachers of young children know about the integration of ELD and subject matter content, how teachers can use functional linguistics as a tool for language study, and how *critical* analyses can address sociopolitical aspects of language in students’ daily lives.

**What About Integrated English Language Development?**

In some states in the United States, like Oregon and California, recent efforts to improve ELD instruction have included new state standards that specifically focus
Complexities in Teaching Language Learners

on English functions and their related grammatical forms to help ELLs gain proficiency in basic social and academic language (Oregon Department of Education, 2006). However, as teachers and specialists have taken up these standards, ELD instruction has become heavily focused on grammar and sentence frames (Mize & Dantas-Whitney, 2007). To push back on the trend promoting isolated language instruction, some researchers and teachers have explored how ELD standards could be tied to content areas like science and social studies in order to enhance their coherence and relevance to students (Short, 1994; Stoddart, Pinal, Latzke, & Canaday, 2002).

Studies have found that curricula that purposefully integrate English learning activity and content learning are effective at enhancing both content and language performance, especially for students with higher levels of English proficiency (Lee, Penfield, & Buxton, 2010). With an integrated approach, ELLs receive more rigorous grade-level content in their regular classroom. Also, language instruction can help ELL students on how to communicate more effectively in the content areas. However, some teachers report that integrated ELD/content instruction can be challenging due to limited time to cover content and little professional development support (Cammarata & Tedick, 2012). Cammarata & Tedick (2012) recommend professional development for teachers on content-specific linguistics (e.g., science texts, history texts, mathematics texts) and, importantly, teaching strategies to integrate ELD and content in meaningful ways.

How Can Functional Linguistics Be a Tool for Content/ELD Integration?

One effective tool for the effective integration of ELD and content is functional linguistics (Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteíza, 2004). Using functional linguistics, teachers select excerpts of content material and engage students in the analysis of specific grammatical features (e.g., verbs, collective nouns) to determine textual meanings. For example, in the sentence, “Their marriage led to a long time of peace between the Powhatan and the English,” the verb led to shows a cause–effect relationship and the collective nouns Powhatan and English place importance on groups (and not individuals) (Ciechanowski, 2012, p. 315). This grammatical analysis, as one focus of instruction, is connected to the larger purposes or goals of the text. For example, history textbook writers often refer to temporality (i.e., a sense of time across decades and eras), causes and effect, importance on dynamic relationships between people, places, and eras, and generalizations across groups or movements of historical significance. Schleppegrell, Achugar, and Oteíza (2004) argue, “Students need to be able to understand how language construes meanings in content-area texts and how the important meanings and concepts of school subjects are realized in language” (p. 68).
What Happens When the Conversation Turns Critical?

It is naïve to think that a teacher could present specific grammatical points and expect all students to willingly and unproblematically embrace them in class conversation and daily use. Language learning involves social positioning and different purposes and intentions. Language learners need to become personally or emotionally invested in using English structures in particular ways and to feel that English lessons meet their needs and interests (Norton Peirce, 1995). One’s social identity and cultural heritage play a central role in feeling invested or compelled to learn English in school. ELL students may see English as part of the dominant European-American society and representative of high-status language. Thus, as students come to “own” English (specifically academic English), they may more effectively learn to manage the tensions between their native and additional languages and how the languages are positioned in their own lives. There are likely to be complex power dynamics between languages that position each as dominant or non-dominant at different times and contexts.

Briscoe, Arriaza, and Henze (2009, p. 18) propose that “language reflects our cultural and physical reality.” Therefore, as racial tensions and stereotypes are part of everyday life, then specific words are the conduits for these inequalities and injustices. A deeply stratified society shapes language(s) in ways that reflect and reinforce unequal power relations. Furthermore, language constructs barriers and differential groupings as we categorize and label people based on a number of social identities. However, Briscoe et al. (2009) also suggest that language can be the ‘trigger’ for wider societal change. Teachers, in particular, could work to “right the effects of past injustices and to intervene in present ones” (p. 16) through language study and leveraging the power of talk. If language were treated not as neutral but as a sociopolitical force in their lives, students could develop critical skills for learning and using English in active ways to shape a better tomorrow.

Who Were the Children, Teachers and Researcher?

In this chapter, I tell the story of my collaborative research with teachers in a Spanish/English dual language immersion (DLI) program at a K–8 school in the Pacific Northwest in the US. The story describes the work that a university researcher, two third-grade teachers, an ELL specialist, and a pre-service teacher undertook to integrate ELD and content instruction in an authentic, effective, and supported way. Our goal was to seamlessly connect language components to science and social studies following state and district guidelines as well as standards for ELD instruction. Regular biweekly after-school meetings with the full team (a grant paid for teachers’ time) were essential to planning, reflecting, assessing, and revising the ELD model in third grade. The project resulted in this third grade moving away from separate pull-out ELD lessons to near-complete inclusion.
The two third-grade teachers, Kim May and Tish Derko, were graduates of the university’s graduate-level licensure program. Tish had five years of teaching experience and Kim was in her first year. Both were bilingual but only Kim was acting as a dual language teacher at this time; Tish was a traditional English-only teacher. The ELL specialist was Helena Beck, who had been in this role at her school for three years and held a master’s degree in applied linguistics from another university. I (university researcher and author of this chapter) had been a bilingual third-grade teacher in California in the 1990s and had been at the university for three years.

The dual language class had 42% Spanish-speaking ELLs (14 of 33 students) who represented various levels of English proficiency, including three students at the lowest ELPA levels (beginner and early intermediate), five at intermediate, five at early advanced, and one student at advanced. The regular education third-grade class in the English-only strand of 13 students had three ELLs from different countries (e.g., Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mexico) who represented early intermediate and intermediate proficiency levels. In this chapter, the focus is on Kim and her dual language class because of the higher percentage of ELLs and need for extensive ELD. During this year, the third-grade dual language class was self-contained so that Kim taught both Spanish and English components, providing literacy and mathematics in each language half the time and provided science and social studies in English only, the whole year. (This was not the typical model used at the school, which more commonly had a Spanish and an English DLI class at each grade and swapped weekly.)

As researcher, I engaged in participant observations from December to June. I observed and participated in science, social studies, and language arts classroom activities from 8:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. four times a week (10 hours per week; 240 hours total). Observations focused on questions such as: How did Kim carry out the ELD and social studies components of the unit? How did students talk and write about their work in the content area? How did students take up the linguistic forms and functions in particular ways and use them to communicate meaning? What was the quality of student engagement during teacher-led lessons and class discussions? Data sources included field notes from observations, audiotaped class conversations, teacher and student interview transcripts, transcripts from teacher group meetings, photographed or copied artifacts of curricular materials and student work, English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) test results, literacy test scores, and pre/post-unit tests. The sections below describe how the team used a functional linguistic and critical approach to plan the unit.

Planning the Integration of Critical Linguistics and Content Area Study

The team analyzed the content curriculum and texts to learn how collective or count/non-count nouns were used. We learned that the text represented
American culture as comprised of peoples and practices of Latino, African-American, Native American, European, and Asian-Americans heritages. The textbook authors made statements about American and other cultures, frequently using modifying adjectives of number (e.g., *some*, *many*, *most*) to make sweeping generalizations. In the following transcript excerpt, the team makes the connection between the ELD and content curriculum for the unit.

*Kathryn*: So I think the key is just finding something that clicks with the content and one aspect of language.

*Tish*: Yeah, I agree.

*Helena*: Maybe we could do generalizing for the week that we do [the social studies unit] culture. Because … one thing that’s important is an understanding that … you have to be careful, there are general statements you can make about cultures but then you have to understand that there’s probably going to be some exceptions.

*Brad*: Mhmm.

*Helena*: So you know, “All Mexicans eat Tamales.” Well, that’s probably not true, I’m sure somewhere there’s a Mexican person who doesn’t so you know just being careful when you’re. … So it’s good to learn about culture and understand when it’s okay and when it’s not okay. Because you could definitely say, “Spaghetti came from Italy.” Okay that’s going be a fact, that’s fine. But be careful about saying, “All Italians eat spaghetti.” You know what I mean?

*Kathryn*: I think that’s a really great fit with this chapter. Because you could even go through this [textbook], and they used the word *most*, *many* in “Almost every culture has a traditional dance, almost every …” I mean that’s one of the things I was noticing, if you look at the language that’s naturally there [in the textbook], it’s just … “Many Americans like to eat food.”

*Helena*: Yeah. Most. (Laughter)

In this excerpt, the teacher-researcher team moved back and forth between the ELD pacing chart and the social studies curriculum to see how they would connect the two. The team talked extensively about *generalizing* and *drawing conclusions* and how they could ‘click’ with the social studies units on immigration and cultural diversity. The goal was to identify one specific English form (e.g., modifying adjectives of number) to highlight during ELD instruction that could be contextualized within a broader conversation about how the history textbook authors used the language function (e.g., generalizing). The class used a highly regarded textbook by Bower and Lobdell (2003), *Social Studies Alive: Our Community and Beyond*.

The chapter on diverse cultures in the United States did not focus on the past or deal with complex verbs forms because it described aspects of American
culture only in the present day, in the present tense. A close reading of the textbook revealed sentences like, “Many Americans like to eat foods shared by Latino cultures” (Bower & Lobdell, 2003, p. 41), and “In some communities, people speak Native American languages” (p. 42). The team identified the types of English words that were repeated multiple times, and we speculated why the authors used these words. In chapter 5, the authors used the modifying adjectives such as *some, many, most, almost,* and *all* 20 times! It appeared to us that these words were employed by authors to make sweeping generalizations about cultures, which were then followed up by specific examples to support the statements. By carefully studying the content area language, the team was able to identify English forms and functions “naturally there” that connected ELD to the subject matter and that represented grammatical points as tools to create broader meaning (i.e., sweeping statements about culture), instead of the more traditional ELD practice of having students work off of decontextualized worksheets or exercises.

**How Did the Lessons Include Language Analysis?**

The team identified several pages from the textbook in which the authors used many modifying adjectives that, we felt, might not be too abstruse for the students. In the following excerpt, the team decided that that students use highlighter pens as a tool to identify and analyze the modifying adjectives. We believed that having students highlight text would help them remember their observations when engaged in post-reading discussion regarding authors’ choice of these words.

**Kathryn:** “Most people in the United States speak English. Many people also use other languages in their homes.”

**Helena:** Oh that’s perfect …

**Kathryn:** And I don’t know, you could even just go through this chapter and just highlight those words.

**Brad:** Sure, sure.

**Kathryn:** And then use those …

**Kim:** Yeah, highlight quantifiers …

**Kathryn:** There are tons in here! “Many Christian cultures share the holiday of Christmas. Most people celebrate the New Year on the 1st of January. The Chinese culture, however, celebrates their new years on a different day each year!” [Laughs]

**Tish:** Generalizing.

**Helena:** As soon as we said that it just seemed, like, it popped out, so that’s good. By the way, if they ask you, the whole *count versus non-count* nouns becomes an issue because you have a “*few books*” but “*some rice*.” It just depends on, if you don’t want to get into it you don’t have to, just say, “What’s the best, what sounds best?” Because my middle-schoolers asked me.
The teachers agreed to engage students with this activity in language analysis, with a warning from Helena that modifying adjectives of number used with “count” nouns (e.g., a few chairs) could be confusing to children if “non-count” exemplars that do not have plural forms (e.g., some furniture) are introduced. Helena’s expertise as language specialist was helpful for defining and discussing the grammar structures such as count/non-count nouns, collective nouns, and modifying adjectives of number. As the group came to understand not only the grammar but the English functions, it became clear how they were used in the social studies chapter.

During the lesson, the teacher, Kim, first defined and explained modifying adjectives of number during a short mini-lesson on grammar. She then asked students to sort the adjectives from smallest to biggest (see Figure 9.1).

Figure 9.1 shows Kim had drawn empty boxes on the board and written all, none, most, some, many, and few on sticky notes. She called students to the board to put them in the correct order. Once students were familiar with these modifying adjectives, she handed out highlighters for students to read photocopied pages of

![Adjective sort (courtesy of Kathryn M. Ciechanowski)](image)
chapter 5 in the social studies textbook and mark up the text whenever one of these modifying adjectives appeared. After students highlighted the modifying adjectives, Kim engaged them in conversation about why it would be important to understand the use of these words.

Ms. May (Kim):  We’ve talked about culture, about the words none, few, some, many, most, all. Why are these different words important? Instead of using none or all, why are the middle words important? Why is it so important to use those words when talking about culture? There were … about 10 to 20 of those words on those [textbook] pages. Why did they use so many of those words?

Nathan:  Because you can’t just say ALL people are bad at sports because most people are good at sports.

Ms. May:  So why can’t you say ALL people are bad at sports?

Nathan:  Because it’s not true.

Maria:  Because a lot of people might not be good at something but they may be good at something else so maybe say, some people have this, some people have that, maybe say like ALL people have talents.

Ms. May:  Okay, so you’re trying to make true sentences … not just sentences that aren’t true.

Joey:  “All Chinese people come here” is not true because most people like to learn English, they study in England.

Ms. May:  We have to be careful because it’s not always true … All … Do you remember that line: “All African-American people are good at sports.” That’s not always true. “All White people are bad at dancing.” I think I’m good at dancing. (Chuckles).

The lesson involving language analysis of the textbook centered on the truthfulness of one’s statements. Kim discussed the importance of these words particularly when talking about culture. Specifically, the word all can be troubling because it implies that everyone in a group behaves in one particular way. The students focused on celebrating talents and feelings of exclusion when a particular person does not fit into the category, all, and should be considered in other ways instead. They focused on finding alternatives that would disprove ways that all people behave. Kim used herself and her love of dance as a funny anecdote to disprove that all White people cannot dance well.

How Did Language Connect to the Sociopolitical Contexts of Their Lives?

In this section, the team discussed how the study of generalizing and modifying adjectives relates to students’ lives and the broader society. The group examined ways that the study of English grammar and social studies would not be isolated
school subjects but, instead, would relate to students’ own lives, in this case a negative incident that had occurred on the playground. By connecting these contexts, the team bridged generalizing with the closely related—and more politically charged—concept of stereotyping. In this way, the group wove together critical linguistics with a focus on social activism. In other words, the instruction incorporated explicit mention of socially acceptable and unacceptable ways of using modifying adjectives that demonstrated power and status positioning across ethnicity, gender, and culture. In this excerpt, the ELL specialist Helena referred to previous lessons she had done with quantifying adjectives and social appropriateness.

Kathryn: I totally love that thing that you brought last time for generalizing …
Helena: It was using quantifiers and taking a statement that’s a general statement and correctly quantifying it. So they had all these statements like, “Baseballs are white.” And one of them was, “Poor people are lazy.” And then they had to check off that they thought that you should add some, a few, all, almost all, whatever. So they have to figure out … how they could role play, for the activism, how they could role play polite ways of correcting somebody.
Brad: Oh!
Helena: So if your friend says, “Girls are stupid,” what could you say? “Well maybe not all girls, my sister is pretty smart. So maybe it’d be better to say, ‘some girls are stupid.’” You know whatever, so that might be …
Brad: Yeah.
Kathryn: … The quantifiers, the specific words, those are forms of language. So pairing that up, then the social activism part, and it’s tied to immigration because even the issue where on the playground, where they’re saying, “Mexicans are lazy.” That ties into this immigration topic.
Brad: Oh, yeah.
Kathryn: But then the social activism piece … because you can help kids learn socially, how to appropriately respond to that and you know, is it really that a lot of Mexicans are lazy? Maybe there’s a few and we created a stereotype out of that? You know … weaving those all in together.

This excerpt notes that Mexican students experienced negative stereotypes on the playground at school, and the team envisioned a way to weave together the playground experience with ELD and content. Kathryn connected generalizing with a similar concept, stereotyping, that would move beyond neutral and disconnected English practice to address insults the Latino children had experienced on the playground. The idea was to help students ‘appropriately respond’ and understand how overgeneralized uses of words like all or most could have negative results like stereotypes.
How Did the Students Use Adjectives to Generalize About American Culture?

In this section, the transcript of students’ in-class conversation shows a complex use of modifying adjectives that reflected ethnic, cultural, and class positioning. Taking up the critical aspect of language and content instruction was not a simple straightforward matter for Kim. Students persistently used inaccurate modifying adjectives to reinforce their own stereotypes about American culture.

*Rolando:* I’m going to say “all,” but it’s not true. All adult Americans drive cars.

*Ms. May:* Okay, but you’re saying it’s not true. [Rolando: I know it’s not true.] Make sure you know if it’s true or not.

*Alexandra:* Most Americans exercise.

*Janet:* This is true: Some Americans lay around and watch video games.

*Julie:* Most Americans drink …

*Ms. May:* Is that true? Probably not “most.”

*Adelina:* Some Americans have blond hair.

*Daniel:* A few Americans are lazy and fat and drink a lot of soda.

*Ms. May:* So if I come from Jupiter, I guess I don’t want to come back, sounds like Americans are lazy and sitting around.

*Lucero:* Most Americans, they get like a *mesera* [waitress/maid] and sit on the ground and see the TV.

*Ms. May:* Like a maid? Most Americans have maids? Most, Lucero?

*Lucero:* Yah. Up the hill, it’s like a full house, all the street.

*Ms. May:* Maybe some … some Americans have maids …

Rolando knowingly made an untrue generalization about Americans, claiming that “it’s not true.” Kim challenged the students’ stereotypes and revoiced, “Sounds like Americans are lazy and sitting around.” To dramatically emphasize this point, Lucero made comments about indulgence and wealth, stating that Americans have maids and live in houses a city block in length. Children took command of adjectives like *most* and *all* to make their own social commentary about American culture. This demonstrates that linguistic analysis of the textbook was not enough for students to use grammar as a tool to positively confront the issue of stereotyping. Just because they understood how to accurately use (in some cases) modifying adjectives did not mean that they felt obligated to do so. Language analysis may have empowered students with the understanding that grammatical tools are useful in meaning making. I suspect the next step would be to explore with them, first, *why* and *how* they may have felt empowered by articulating stereotypes of white people; and, second, how to *use* these tools to positively influence the sociopolitical world in which they live.
The team’s focus during planning on politeness and appropriateness now seemed disingenuous given the students’ complex social positionings, especially in regards to ethnicity, privilege, and class. Although children were aware that overgeneralizing with words like all or most would lead to inaccuracy, feelings of exclusion, or negative characterizations of people, some of our Mexican-American students perpetuated stereotypes about white middle-class America’s reliance on cars, inactivity, use of video games, blond hair, alcohol use, laziness, consumption of soda, wealth, and indulgence. What is unclear is how they identified themselves in this conversation: as Americans, Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, or other. To be clear, the students represented in the excerpt were a mix of European-American, Mexican, African-American, English dominant, and Spanish dominant. Clearly, to fully address these questions with students, the critical aspects of this unit would need to be more extensive and part of in-depth and highly focused conversations. The ELD and social studies objectives seemed to be addressed rather efficiently. However, critical analysis seems to not be accomplished quickly because it involves the explicit study of social status, identity, and power relations in society, which can be confusing and ‘dangerous’ especially for 8-year-olds.

Where Do We Go From Here?

This chapter explored how functional linguistics with a critical approach guided the teacher-researcher team to connect ELD concepts with social studies content. Rather than teach generalizing and modifying adjectives in a decontextualized way, we sought ways to teach grammar features in the context of the standard social studies textbook. Indeed, through the use of functional linguistics, the group found that the textbook authors made quite a few general statements in their descriptions of American culture, using modifying adjectives like some, all, many, and most. By linking ELD to social studies content, students could see why modifying adjectives might be worth studying and how they are used to communicate meaning. This set the stage for further discussion about word choice and its importance in communicating intended or unintended meanings.

Our collaborative work aimed to help students connect ELD forms and functions to their lives. However, we realize now, in retrospect, that it makes sense that students would bring their own pre-existing biases to any analysis of text, even with their newfound knowledge of language forms and functions. Of course, our Mexican-American students expressed their own stereotypes of the dominant mainstream white US culture. The unit was scheduled to be taught in a three-week block in May, and this brief unit of study is problematic when it comes to conceptual learning. There was little time allotted to the in-depth discussion needed to address stereotypes and address the sociopolitical aspects of language use. In fact, the culminating class conversation (described above) occurred on
June 4, which was in the final weeks of the school year. This study highlights the complexity of adding the critical component to ELD/content instruction and suggests the need for a deeper, more dedicated, and carefully planned unit of language study that would span many weeks or months and perhaps be a focus throughout the school year. Three difficulties made evident in this study, and suggestions for change, follow.

1. The textbook—a well-regarded text—seemed to be present a romantic, rose-colored image cultures, as if cultures were positioned in society with equal status. The premise that US culture is made up of many varied ethnic cultures—without regard for their current position in society or the sociohistorical ways they came to exist in the US—does not reflect the harsh daily reality faced by many people of historically oppressed cultures. We encourage teachers to explicitly address the unequal power relations between dominant and marginalized cultural groups, but of course in a developmentally appropriate manner. Children seem to respond wholeheartedly, more fully engaged, when curricular content is consequential to their lives.

2. A different approach to this class conversation about American culture might be to brainstorm all the generalizations floating in the air about culture in the US. This would give children an opportunity to lay it all on the table. Then, the teacher could have students sort/categorize/name these generalizations as accurate, inaccurate or partially accurate (i.e., stereotype). The next step would be to explain the reasoning and evidence for each decision. This type of classification activity would allow students to analyze their own statements and do critical thinking around their own conceptions of culture. It would address their apparent need to share stereotypes they have heard or seen, make visible their accuracy or truthfulness, and enable them to move to the next step of critical analysis about how they would make particular judgments.

3. Teachers could reframe the narrative so that students would not need to be warned to be polite and politically correct but, instead, would be invited to play the role of sociolinguists (aka, language detectives). Students are taught to explore the many uses of English words in society and their lives, the multiple voices or perspectives in dialogues, and the sociopolitical meanings given to specific utterances. It could be a regular classroom practice for students to investigate the uses of language in regards to status, power dynamics, and positioning. Rather than put students in a relatively passive role as recipients of instruction, teachers could empower them to be detectives and could provide the tools to make sense of the language that they face on the playground, on television, in movies, at home, and elsewhere in the community.
CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMON CORE

I use the third-grade ELA standard, relevant to informational texts.

Student Learning Activities: analyzed grammatical features of textbook, including modifying adjectives; learned new vocabulary; and examined bias of text and author

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.4** Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.5** Use text features and search tools (e.g., key words, sidebars, hyperlinks) to locate information relevant to a given topic efficiently.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.6** Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text.

COMMENTARY

It is so interesting how the students, in their study of academic language, shift back and forth from its analysis on the page to connections with their lives and community. Clearly, the trend in the teaching of non-native speakers of English has emphasized the integration of language learning with the learning of math, science, history, and language arts and, especially, through the use of higher-level thinking processes. Integrated curricular units of study through the lens of critical linguistic analysis can make a real difference in the learning of second language learners: to use language as tool to understand their lives more deeply and to more effectively negotiate and manage power relations in their everyday lives. An important lesson from Kathryn’s work suggests that we must not teach any language system as objective or neutral. Rather, we should teach students how language reflects difference, power, and discrimination. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to be intentional about using critical literacy as a lens in the teaching of language and content.

References


Knowledge about the form and function of language is a crucial part of the skill set for developing young children as critical consumers and producers of children’s literature. Our goal in this chapter is to describe a set of activities enacted in one linguistically and culturally diverse early years classroom with children aged 5 years. With high-stakes national literacy testing, schools such as the study site are under pressure to focus on the print basics. The authors and the classroom teacher describe students’ analysis of sophisticated picture books and process drama strategies in a way that made critical literacy more concrete, accessible and relevant. Outcomes of the activities included the students making connections between their lived experiences and those in the text under investigation, developing skills of inferring, and moving beyond meaning-making or text use to critical text analysis.

Introduction

In this chapter we describe a critical fairytales unit taught to 4.5- to 5.5-year-olds in a context of intensifying pressure to raise literacy achievement. The unit was infused with lessons on reinterpreted fairytales followed by process drama activities built around a sophisticated picture book, *Beware of the Bears!* (MacDonald, 2004). The latter entailed a *text analytic approach* to critical literacy derived from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). This approach provides a way of analysing how words and discourse are used to represent the world in a particular way and shape reader relations with the author in a particular field (Janks, 2010).
The fairytales unit was taught in Ms. Sue Porter’s (pseudonym) Preparatory (Prep) class in a large public school serving the linguistically and culturally diverse population of a high poverty area. Prep is a non-compulsory year of education offered to all children in the Australian state of Queensland prior to first grade. In Ms. Porter’s class, as in the school in general, approximately 15% of the students identify as Indigenous1 and approximately 10% live in homes where English is an additional language. Moreover, as is the case throughout the school, the level of significant educational problems, including difficulties with receptive and expressive language, is high (Luke, Dooley, & Woods, 2011). Since imposition of high-stakes national benchmark testing, and provision of special Federal funding to ‘Close the Gap’, Ms. Porter and colleagues have been under considerable pressure to improve literacy outcomes.

The press for achievement on national tests of reading, writing, traditional grammar and spelling has prompted increased instruction in phonics, comprehension strategies, knowledge of parts of speech, and on-demand composition in Australian schools. As a consequence, worksheets, test papers and flashcards have become the privileged texts in many early childhood classrooms. In this context, Ms. Porter’s critical fairytales unit challenges two intersecting agendas: one, that critical literacy, and indeed critical linguistics, is too ambitious for early years students; and two, that improved literacy outcomes are best pursued by narrowing the curriculum to the ‘basics’ prioritised by the national testing regimen (Comber, 2012). The unit might, therefore, be of interest to early childhood teachers grappling with similar agendas in other settings.

Ms. Porter and colleagues seized upon the opportunities for critical literacy provided by a national curriculum formally implemented in Queensland for the first time in 2012: the Australian Curriculum: English (ACE). Crucially for our purposes here, the ACE raised the status of literature and provided spaces for a text analytic approach to critical literacy.

An overarching statement taken from the ACE hints at the innovative approach for the re/introduction of critical literacy more generally and critical linguistics more particularly into classroom practice:

[The Australian Curriculum] English uses standard grammatical terminology within a contextual framework, in which language choices are seen to vary according to the topics at hand, the nature and proximity of the relationships between the language users, and the modalities or channels of communication available.

(ACARA, 2012, p. 4)

The innovation is the weaving of two different language theories. By way of explanation, the use of ‘standard grammatical terminology’ points to elements of traditional grammar. The statement that ‘language choices are seen to vary’ according to the ‘relationship between the language users’ and ‘modalities’
borrows from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), also known as ‘functional grammar’ (see Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The statement also refers to the three systems of meaning developed in SFL theory: the ‘topics at hand’, the ‘relationships between the language users’ and reference to ‘modalities’ or channels of communication. The important point is that the model of language appropriated in the ACE pays attention to both form (structure) and function (meaning). This approach is examined here along with the teaching activities Ms. Porter developed with us for her Prep class.

We were interested in three points of enquiry:

• What counts as critical literacy in the Prep year?
• What counts as critical linguistic content in the Prep year?
• How can this content be delivered in challenging contexts of teaching and learning?

We worked with Ms. Porter to explore possibilities for critical literacy in general and critical linguistics in particular. Ms. Porter and her colleagues took responsibility for planning and teaching parts one and two of the fairytales unit and we, as teacher/researchers, shared the responsibility of planning and teaching the third part, the suite of critical linguistic activities, with Ms. Porter. We organise our discussion of the three parts of the fairytales unit using the four resources model (Luke & Freebody, 1999). The model describes the repertoire of practices around text required in contemporary literate societies:

• code-breaking—knowing and using the alphabet and other textual codes;
• text participation—drawing on knowledge of topic (e.g. reader factors) and text (e.g. text factors) to make meaning;
• text use—taking part in social activities to which a text is integral; and
• text analysis—critically analysing how a text tries to position readers within a particular world view.

The four resources model is not a pedagogic model specifying a sequence of learning activities; nor is it a developmental model specifying phases of literacy learning. Rather, it is a tool for systematically mapping students’ literate practices and the practices that feature in school curriculum. We have used it for these purposes in the larger project within which our work with Ms. Porter occurred (Luke, Dooley, & Woods, 2011; Luke, Woods, & Dooley, 2011). In particular, the model has provided us with a nuanced picture of comprehension—a major curriculum imperative in the wake of high-stakes testing. From a four resources perspective, comprehension requires students to not only break textual codes and use text in particular ways, but also to both participate in and critique textual meanings in all their cultural specificity and historical contingency. In this way, text analytic practices looking at the ideological work of grammar complement practices of conventional literacy.
Part One: Exploring Traditional Fairytales

The fairytale was a somewhat unexplored genre for most of Ms. Porter’s students, although many had seen the Walt Disney DVD animations of the traditional French fairytales of *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*, the traditional German fairytale, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and the traditional Danish fairytale, *The Little Mermaid*. Ms. Porter built on students’ knowledge of the Disney movies and specifically introduced the picture book form of the traditional English fairytale, *The Three Little Pigs*, and the traditional Norwegian fairytale, *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, among others. During this first part of the unit, she focused explicitly on one of the content descriptions from the ACE:


This part of the unit required the students to engage in and build their expertise with the four resources, for example:

- **code-breaking**—knowing and using the alphabetic code of written English in attempts at reading environmental print in the fairytale learning centre and scribing statements under pictures of an important scene in a fairytale;
- **text participation**—creating mind maps of fairytale topics (e.g. the construction of homes in fairytales) and the staging features of fairytales (e.g. an excitement graph for *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*);
- **text use**—writing and illustrating a story map for *Three Little Pigs*; and
- **text analysis**—critically analysing how fairytales construct imaginative stereotypes for princesses, old women, giants, princes, frogs and ogres.

Part Two: Exploring Reinterpreted Fairytales

In the second part of the fairytales unit developed by Ms. Porter and her Prep colleagues, the students explored a series of reinterpreted fairytales (Figure 10.1).

This part of the unit was designed to target the following ACE content description:

- Explore the different contribution of words and images to meaning in stories and informative texts (ACARA, 2012, p. 21).

On this occasion, the focus was on stories rather than information texts. Each of the books shown in Figure 10.1 is a reinterpreted fairytale as it somehow ‘twists’ the original version to make aspects of a very familiar story unfamiliar. For example, in *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989), Mr. Wolf mounts an eloquent case that he is innocent of the murder of the first and second little pigs. He asserts that the combination of his sneezing cold and the
substandard carpentry skills and stupidity of the little pigs resulted in two huge
(separate) sneezes blowing in the houses of straw and sticks respectively, causing
the deaths of the first and second little pigs.

The Prep students responded enthusiastically to the humour in these books
with much discussion focused on the choices of words and visual images. For
example, the students spoke about the difference of meaning between ‘I huffed
and I puffed and I blew the house in’ (traditional fairytale) and ‘Well I huffed.
And I snuffed. And I sneezed a great sneeze’ (Scieszka, 1989). They also observed
the meaning potential of the disparate visual images, in particular the images of
Mr. Wolf as ‘wild and savage’ in the traditional fairytale version in contrast to the
immaculately preened Mr. Wolf, dressed in a suit and tie, in The True Story of the
Three Little Pigs (Scieszka, 1989).

During this part of the unit, Ms. Porter continued to map the students’ literate
practices across the four resources, sometimes with different activities and strategies
to accommodate the new focus on reinterpreted fairytales and the visual mode:
• *code-breaking*—knowing and using the alphabetic code of written English in attempts at reading environmental print in the fairytale scenes and scribing statements beneath pictures of an important scene from a fairytale;

• *text participation*—creating mind maps of fairytale topics for the reinterpreted fairytale and comparing these to the originals (e.g. comparing *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987) with the traditional version of *Cinderella* to find what is similar and what is different);

• *text use*—using the text to talk about changing social relations (e.g. comparing *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987) with the traditional version of *Cinderella* to consider how society has changed over time); and

• *text analysis*—critically analysing author intent, e.g. why would an author make that change? What did the author want to achieve? Whose perspective is missing in *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*? (Scieszka, 1989).

Two important points stem from our observation of the students’ work in the second part of the fairytale unit. First, the stimulus texts broadened the range of possibilities for code-breaking, text participation, text use and text analysis. Second, it was only when the students were engaged in discussion of the reinterpreted fairytale that high-level comprehension of the traditional fairytale showed through. Put another way, comparing and contrasting the written and visual structure and purpose of texts provided the impetus for substantive conversations about both sets of texts. *This point alone demonstrates the importance of the purposeful selection of appropriate resources and teaching sequences to give students a reason to engage with talk about the traditional texts offered in stage one of the fairytale unit.*

**Part Three: Exploring Critical Linguistics**

In part three of the fairytale unit, we worked with Ms. Porter to introduce the critical linguistics lessons. These trial lessons were planned to target the following ACE content description:

• Read predictable texts, practising phrasing and fluency, and monitor meaning using concepts about print and emerging contextual, semantic, grammatical and phonic knowledge (ACARA, 2012, p. 24).

In this part of the unit, our investigations centred on two questions: what counts as critical linguistic content in the Prep year? How can this content be delivered in challenging contexts of teaching and learning? We decided to trial lessons where students explored noun and verb groups. We had no intention of weighing down the lesson with a grammatical metalanguage. Rather, we wanted the students to learn two things about noun and verb groups: one, that these text factors are amenable to the making of certain types of meaning; and two, that they can be manipulated to make different meanings of those types.
Technically speaking, a noun group is a grammatical term to refer to the group of words building on a noun. Noun groups have a particular and predictable structure, although not all structural elements appear in every noun group. At its most basic, noun groups often (but not always) include the following three elements (Derewianka, 2011, pp. 44–60):

- **Pointer**—tells ‘which one?’ and can include articles (‘the’, ‘a’, ‘an’), demonstratives (e.g. ‘this’, ‘those’) or possessives (e.g. ‘my’, ‘Ann’s’);
- **Quantifiers**—tell ‘how many?’ (e.g. ‘two’, ‘several’);
- **Describers**—tell ‘what’s it like?’ (e.g. ‘wooden’) and can provide factual information (e.g. the ‘red’ box) or a more personal opinion (e.g. my ‘sweet’ baby);
- **Thing**—the head noun in the group (e.g. my sweet ‘baby’)

Following Derewianka’s (2011) advice, when comprehending, it is advantageous if students approach the noun group as a ‘chunk of information’ rather than as separate words. In terms of composing text, Derewianka (2011, p. 42) comments that ‘some students don’t take advantage of all the possibilities offered by the noun group’.

Technically speaking, verb groups permit the expression of different aspects of experience (Derewianka, 2011). In stories, verb groups commonly involve:

- **Action verbs**—what is being done (e.g. ate, bounced, broke, etc.)
- **Saying verbs**—how word are spoken (e.g. said, ordered, panted, etc.)

Action verbs usually refer to physical activities and their inclusion in stories helps to make the experience come alive for the listener or reader. Saying verbs usually occur in stories so listeners and readers can get ‘to know the characters by the way they speak and interact with others’ (Derewianka, 2011, p. 21). An important point to remember is that saying verbs are generally not used in students’ everyday interactions; they are a structure found in the more literary language of stories. It appears that if students have not regularly experienced the grammar of written stories—as was the case with Ms. Porter’s students—then language learning activities must focus explicitly on this text factor and its function. Furthermore, both action and saying verbs are evaluative in that they each require the speaker or author to make a choice out of all possible choices. For example, ‘“Let’s dance!” he squealed’ (MacDonald, 2004) represents a different experience than ‘“Let’s dance,” he sighed’.

The series of critical linguistics lessons was framed around sharing and discussing one stimulus text, *Beware of the Bears!* (MacDonald, 2004). Although this book can stand alone as a read aloud, its ultimate pleasure is the way it extends the modern-day version of Southey’s original *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (first published in 1837). The story begins with the Bear family discovering that their home has been ransacked during Goldilocks’ unauthorised visit. Deciding to seek
Exploring Language Through Picture Books

revenge, they find out where Goldilocks lives and then wait for her to go out before proceeding to wreak havoc in her home. On her return, Goldilocks nonchalantly exclaims that it’s not her home; she is trespassing yet again. But in whose home? At that point, a double-page wordless spread is devoted to an image of the Bear family sneaking out the back door of the damaged home whilst a wolf enters through the front door. The wolf’s reaction is captured in a wordless double-page spread on the last page. As is the case with post-modern picture books, the ending is deliberately left open and the reader must be involved with constructing the meaning both from the visuals and knowledge of other texts. In this case, Beware of the Bears! cannot be understood and enjoyed by engaging with the written text only; the illustrations must be understood and their meanings integrated with understandings of the written text and borrowings from other texts. To be clear, these sorts of post-modern picture books are fundamentally different from the picture books used in parts one and two of the unit (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 1999).

**Process Drama**

We engaged the students through a range of process drama activities. Bowell and Heap (2005, p. 59) describe process drama as a form of ‘applied theatre in which participants, together with the teacher, constitute the theatrical ensemble and engage in drama to make meaning for themselves’. In process drama, students are not involved with learning and presenting lines from a pre-written dramatic text; rather, they are scripting their own presentation as the narrative and tensions unfold in their own spaces and over time. An internal audience replaces the external audience of the theatre so that the students are both the theatrical ensemble that creates the presentation and the audience that receives it.

Process drama is a medium whereby students can empathise with an experience they have not had in order to make sense of it in the text. For example, it is reasonable to expect that young children would not have firsthand experience of ransacking someone else’s home. While students can read and view the accounts of others (in this case, the Bears’ revenge, Goldilocks’ proclivity to trespass, and the wolf’s dismay at returning to his ransacked home), they can be given more powerful vicarious experiences through process drama. Such strategies permit students to enter different subject positions, explore the subtexts, that is, the different possibilities of thoughts behind the action, and thus better appreciate the lived reality of a range of fairytale characters. Benefits of the subtext strategy include: making connections between students’ lived experiences and those in the text under investigation; developing skills at inferring; moving beyond viewing to becoming; and developing a deep understanding or empathy for participants from the target text (Clyde, 2003).

The impetus for our trial activities revolved around four interconnected schools of thought: (1) simultaneously building a repertoire of resources for
code-breaking, text participation, text use and text analysis work; (2) targeting ACE content descriptions from the interpreting, analysing and evaluating sub-strand with a particular focus on noun and verb groups; (3) using sophisticated picture books as a teaching resource to build shared experience; and (4) implementing process drama activities as a pedagogical strategy.

The four activity tables document the trial lessons introduced to the Prep students.

**ACTIVITY ONE** Descriptions (building the noun group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Staging</th>
<th>Teaching Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Starting with the students sitting in a circle so everyone has equal contributing rights, ask the students to think about what they know about Goldilocks. Pose the following questions but don’t ask for answers just yet.</td>
<td>Although the critical linguistic lessons were framed around <em>Beware of the Bears!</em> the book was not introduced until the introductory activities were completed. This is because it was important to build on the students’ personal and vicarious experiences prior to introducing the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How would they describe Goldilocks?</td>
<td>The focus is on building the noun group by adding an adjective, but you don’t need to teach students the technical metalanguage. The noun group can be expanded by adding an adjective before the noun, for example, ‘a messy Goldilocks’, ‘a carefree Goldilocks’, or ‘a kind Goldilocks’. Students’ nominations can be photographed and scribed for a display of descriptive noun groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What does Goldilocks look like?</td>
<td>The purpose is to make visible author ideology. Author language choices are evaluative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How does Goldilocks behave?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What does Goldilocks smell like?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What sorts of things does Goldilocks do?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Ask the students to think of one word to fill in the gap: ‘A ............ Goldilocks’. Go around the group and ask each child to offer one suggestion. When all students have one nomination, go around the circle again so students can repeat their nominations, but this time encourage students to use an action and an expressive voice at the same time they give their nomination. e.g. if the nomination is ‘a happy Goldilocks’ the student could show a happy expression and skip on the spot.</td>
<td>This part of the activity can be videotaped to make a comprehensive but concise record of the event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Discuss similarities and differences of the students’ nominations, especially if the nominations offer opposing viewpoints, e.g. ‘a sweet Goldilocks’ as distinct from ‘a sneaky Goldilocks’. Ask the students to justify their nominations.</td>
<td>Bear and Wolf are main characters in the stimulus text, so this primes the students for sharing the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Once students have finalised their nomination and the action that accompanies it, get them to line up and ‘perform’ their representation as a ‘Mexican Wave’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Repeat for ‘Bear’ and then again for ‘Wolf’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**ACTIVITY TWO**  Sculptures (action and saying verbs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Staging</th>
<th>Teaching Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Working in groups of three, one child becomes a lump of clay and another becomes a sculptor. The sculptor sculpts the lump of clay into a statue of Goldilocks doing something. The third student is the audience for the time being.</td>
<td>It might be more appropriate to get the sculptor to either give instructions or demonstrations rather than physically touching their lump of clay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Take photos of statues (who remain very still) and scribe the artist’s statements using these two sentence prompts:</td>
<td>The focus is on getting the artist to use an action verb to make the experience come alive for the listener/viewer (even though the statue stays perfectly still) and another saying verb other than ‘said’ so we can get to know more about the character. If the artist knows what they want to sculpt but does not have the specific word (vocabulary) to complete the sentence, the teacher should use this as a teachable moment to introduce new vocabulary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Goldilocks is ...........’ (insert action verb, e.g. Goldilocks is looking through the window)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Goldilocks said, “...........”’ (using a saying verb instead of ‘said’, e.g. Goldilocks moaned, ‘My tummy is full’).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Discuss similarities and differences of author choice. Who created a positive image of Goldilocks? What words were used to make it seem positive? Who created a negative image of Goldilocks? What words were used to make it seem negative?</td>
<td>The important point is that authors have the potential to create different sorts of meaning for their audience through the verb group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Swap roles so all students in the group get to be a statue, an artist and an audience member. Repeat the sequence so ‘Bear’ and ‘Wolf’ statues are made.</td>
<td>Bear and Wolf are main characters in the stimulus text, so this primes the students for sharing the book.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ACTIVITY THREE**  Introducing the text *Beware of the Bears!* by Alan MacDonald and illustrated by Gwyneth Williamson (2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Staging</th>
<th>Teaching Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Show cover. What do you think this book might be about? Where do you think the Bears might be? Why would Father Bear be shining a torch? What sort of Bears do you think they are?</td>
<td>The purpose is to elicit students’ predictions about the text they are going to share.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Discuss title, author, publisher, title page and/or dedication page.</td>
<td>Interestingly, this text has a double-page prequel before the title page. Discuss what this is about and why an author would have set up the book this way.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 Read the book, first time without taking questions or comments from the students. The teacher can ask probing questions, but don’t stop to receive answers from the students.

4 Read the book again, this time, talking about the story and pictures as appropriate and allowing the students to contribute observations from their own life experiences. Ask the students: what do you think of that? Do you do that? Why did that happen? What do you notice about the pictures on this page? Why has the illustrator drawn the pictures like that? Why did the author describe the Bears as ‘hopping mad’? Why did the author use the word ‘ordered’ in the sentence ‘Find out where she lives!’ ordered Daddy Bear?’

5 The second last page is a double-page (almost) wordless spread of the Bear family exiting the house via the rear door whilst a wolf returns home from a shopping trip through the front door. Why did the author and illustrator agree not to explain what was happening here in words? What meaning do you make of the image? How do you know? What might each character be thinking?

6 The final page is a double-page wordless spread of the wolf’s reaction at finding his home ransacked. Why did the author and illustrator agree not to explain what was happening here in words? What meaning do you make of the image? How do you know? What might the wolf be thinking?

The purpose of an uninterrupted first reading is to foreground the meaning-making experience of sharing a book. To stop and start discussions can be to make it difficult for young students to keep the logic of the story in their heads.

Teacher questions can be planned in advance, written on sticky notes and added to the corner of the appropriate page. This will help to keep the lesson flowing whilst ensuring target questions are not missed out. Focus on some carefully chosen descriptive noun groups (e.g. uninvited guests, the breakfast table, Mummy Bear’s best blouse, etc.), action verbs (e.g. hit, sent back, splattered, etc.) and saying verbs (e.g. sniffed, grumbled, gargled, etc.).

The focus can be on how gestures make meaning and how we can ‘read’ meaning from gestures, for example, concepts such as viewing angle, colour and focus. Praise the students’ efforts when using descriptive noun groups and appropriate vocabulary for noun and verb groups.

Examine how gestures make meaning and how meaning can be ‘read’ from gestures, for example, concepts such as viewing angle, colour and focus. Again, praise the students’ efforts when using descriptive noun groups and appropriate vocabulary for noun and verb groups.

ACTIVITY FOUR  Frozen photographs (action and saying verbs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Staging</th>
<th>Teaching Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Set up working groups of 4 to 6 students. Each group is to decide on one scene from the text that is particularly meaningful. Create a frozen photograph of that scene. (Students can be characters or a prop such as furniture or a tree, etc.)</td>
<td>The teacher visits each group to encourage all the members to think about how they are going to use gestures to create meaning. Allow the students to return to the book if need be.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2 Get each group to ‘present’ their freeze frame to the rest of the class. Count the students in by saying ‘3, 2, 1 and freeze’. Tell students to remain frozen for up to a minute. Allow the class a minute to silently walk around the freeze frame to notice the statues from different viewpoints.

3 Use the ‘tap-in’ technique to bring one individual character or prop to life. Ask the character or prop to say ‘I am …….’ (finish with an action verb, e.g. ‘I am sneaking out the back door’). Teacher taps the student again so they return to the freeze position. Ask the students in the audience to say what an author might write (using a saying verb, e.g. The wolf sighed, ‘Home at last’). These frozen photographs can be captured and imported to a software file. Speech bubbles might then be added.

4 Continue until all characters are tapped-in. Ensure all groups get the chance to present. If different groups present the same ‘image’, then the students’ different responses can be discussed.

Part three of the fairytales unit engaged the students in different practices across the four resources model. Although the code-breaking work continued in the same vein as in part two of the unit, the other practices were altered:

- **code-breaking**—once again, the use of the post-modern picture book necessitated high-level competence in breaking the code for integrated written and visual texts;
- **text participation**—this time, meaning had to be made from the integration of the written and visual modes (including gestures). Students could not escape the internal meaning-making system of either mode. The critical linguistics focus made visible the structure of descriptive language, that is, the placement of adjectives in noun groups and the purpose in adding them;
- **text use**—written and visual text had to be used and reinterpreted for use with the internal audience of the process drama; students were engaged with creating texts with their bodies and voices; and
- **text analysis**—as is the case with post-modern picture books, students had to interrogate the visual text to examine its assumptions, values and positions. Much discussion was had about points of view (e.g. fairness, the morality of trespass and revenge); moreover, students were required to take a critical stance when reproducing the frozen photos and composing verbal text. This was not an ideologically neutral activity; rather, it highlighted the fact that all texts are constructed within socially, culturally and historically specific viewpoints.
Discussion

We set out to investigate critical literacy in general and a text analytic approach in particular in a Prep class in a context marked by ethnic and linguistic diversity. We comment on three of our findings.

First, we conclude that both critical literacy and critical linguistics are feasible in Prep, even in challenging contexts such as that presented in Ms. Porter’s class. These 4.5- to 5.5-year-olds worked to ‘unmake or unpick’ the ideological choices of the author and illustrator (Janks, 1993, p. iii). In the few lessons we described here, students were scaffolded to use adjectives to build noun groups and to work with the disparate forms of verb groups. This reflected the needs of both English learners and students with language difficulties. We contend that neither linguistic diversity nor the incidence of language difficulties were reasons for holding back on critical linguistics content. It is not necessary to saturate activities for the very youngest children with a technical metalanguage (e.g. ‘adjective’, ‘noun’ and ‘verb’), in order to infuse the classroom with the robust knowledge about the language model inherent in the teaching sequences.

Second, each of three parts of the fairytales unit required students to engage as text participants, text users and text analysts even when they were still acquiring foundational code-breaking capabilities. This is cause for consideration in other similar contexts where pressure to prioritise conventional literacy in general and code-breaking in particular is strong.

Finally, we suggest that critical literacy and critical linguistic content can be developed in challenging contexts through active, meaningful activities including process drama and via the sharing of sophisticated picture books. Together with Ms. Porter, we found possibilities for bringing critical literacy and critical linguistics into complex teaching and learning contexts for Prep students without forsaking the imperative to develop back-to-the-basics print content. With Ms. Porter, we remain steadfast in our belief in the right of all students, including the youngest and most disadvantaged, to sophisticated repertoires of literacy practices.

Acknowledgements

This chapter reports data collected as part of an Australian Research Council-funded project. We owe a debt of gratitude to the teachers, students and administrators at the school and to the Queensland Teachers Union. We thank our research colleagues Vinesh Chandra, John Davis, Katherine Doyle, Michael Dezuanni, Amanda Levido, Allan Luke, Kathy Mills, Wendy Mott and Annette Woods of Queensland University of Technology and John McCollow and Lesley MacFarlane of the Queensland Teachers Union.
CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMON CORE

With this unit taught to 5-year-olds, I use the first-grade standards for reading and writing.

SLA: practiced fluency/phrasing chunks of text; used cueing systems and learned concepts of print; retold fairy tales; analyzed meaning of words, phrases and illustrations; did text–text analysis; analyzed author/illustrator bias and purposes; wrote/illustrated story maps; engaged in process drama to represent interpretations of text; wrote captions of text illustrations.

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.1** Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.2** Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.3** Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.4** Identify words and phrases in stories or poems that suggest feelings or appeal to the senses.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.5** Explain major differences between books that tell stories and books that give information, drawing on a wide reading of a range of text types.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.6** Identify who is telling the story at various points in a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.7** Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.9** Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in stories.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.3** Write narratives in which they recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure.

COMMENTARY

This critical literacy unit clearly addresses all four resources in Luke and Freebody’s model. Students practiced and learned foundational knowledge (fluency, cueing systems, concepts of print); text participation (analysis of adjectives in noun groups and their purposes; mind maps, comparison of mind maps); text use (reinterpretation of texts; creating texts with bodies and
voices); and text analysis (“interrogate the visual text to examine its assumptions, values and positions”). Beryl and Karen provide compelling evidence that 5-year-olds are ready for critical literacy when done in a developmentally appropriate manner. Like in Kathryn Ciechanowski’s piece in Chapter 9, this chapter emphasizes the teaching of functional linguistics to young learners. With great precision, Beryl and Karen show how the four resources can be addressed in a single curricular unit in a way that appears seamless and unforced.

Note
1 In the Australian context, the category Indigenous refers to students who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

References


This page intentionally left blank
PART IIID

Engaging Young Learners in Critical Social Action Projects
This page intentionally left blank
CRITICAL LITERACY FINDS A ‘PLACE’

Writing and Social Action in a Low-Income Australian Grade 2/3 Classroom

Barbara Comber and Pat Thomson, with Marg Wells

Using the children’s concerns about their neighborhood, the teacher engaged her class in a critical literacy project that not only involved a complex set of literate practices but also taught the children about power and the possibilities for local civic action. The unit reflects ‘literacy’ as a broader set of cultural practices, besides the traditional language arts. I invite the reader to notice the rich inter-disciplinary dimensions of the unit. Like Marg’s second and third graders, can you imagine your students also engaging in the civic life of their community? As you read, perhaps take notes on connections you can make between Marg’s teaching and the CCS, before you read those that I identify at chapter’s end.

The Class, School, and Neighborhood

Marg Wells’ class was a mixed grade 2/3 class. The children brought with them a range of cultural life-world experience and knowledge. Some of their parents came to Australia as refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia, others were of Middle Eastern and Eastern European cultural heritage. Within the language and cultural groups in the class, there were few further differences of religion, parental education, rural and urban locations, connections to homelands, networks of commerce, and webs of politics. The classroom can, on one hand, be seen as a microcosm of Australian differences, but, on the other hand, all the children’s families live on an economically tenuous terrain. A recent study by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (Baum, Stimson, Connor, Mullins, & Davis, 1999) named The Parks as the second most vulnerable metropolitan
location in Australia. One in every two young people between the ages of 15 and 24 is unemployed, one in every two adults lives at or below the poverty line, and seven out of every 10 people of employable age have no qualifications (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997).

The government planning ‘solution’ to the perceived ‘problem’ of concentrations of families of poverty in various parts of the city is to engineer a different population mix. This is achieved through redevelopment projects in which private companies demolish, renovate, and redesign neighborhood environments so that finally there is a blend of public and privately owned dwellings. The new public tenancies created through this process are available at market rates and only to approved clients. The total number of public houses is reduced, their tenants are forced to move elsewhere, and social networks are dramatically disrupted (Badcock, 1997; Orchard, 1999).

Government, popular media, and residents in more up-market parts of the city now see it as a place for ‘others’, a kind of antipodean ghetto of people who are dependent, feral, depressed, and/or lazy. The houses are run down and in need of major repairs. The area was tagged for redevelopment some years ago, the housing stock allowed to run down. Recently, many of the houses were bulldozed rather than repaired after tenants had moved, and the little primary school where Marg works is also under threat of closure. Marg has strong feelings about what has happened in the area. She says,

There are a lot of worried parents in the area, especially now with the vacant houses, the so-called vacant houses in the area—they’ve got squatters in them, there are houses that are having things pinched off them, and fences pulled down and fires started in there. It’s really scary. It’s because it’s in-between; they won’t do the places up, they won’t put their money in, they’re just emptying them … and yet the project, the redevelopment hasn’t got the go ahead, so they’re not knocking them down and building others. It just wouldn’t happen in other areas.

This is the neighborhood context in which Marg designed and situated her grade 2/3 curriculum. What was going on in the children’s lives became the object of study in their classroom. A team of teachers, including Marg, rather than ignoring or commiserating with the students’ circumstances, helped them explore and contribute to the urban renewal project through their involvement in the literacy and social power unit.

Writing and Drawing Your Place: What the Children Made of It

To initiate the literacy and social power unit, the children discussed, wrote, and drew pictures in response to a protocol designed by their teachers, which asked them to consider:
• the best things in their lives
• what made them really happy, worried, or angry
• what they would wish for if they could have three wishes
• what they would change about their neighborhood, school, and world
• whether they thought young people had the power to change things.

These questions invited the children to move from the personal, to the local, to the global; to make evaluations and imagine what might be changed; and to consider whether young people have the power to change things. This sequence of directed thought, reflection, and imagining from the situated, specific and local to the more abstract, imagined, hypothetical, and global is, we believe, important to note. In this classroom, Marg designed an assignment that asked the children to represent their thinking through drawing three wishes, something that worried them, and something that made them angry. The children were required to write captions explaining their drawings. Their products reflected their interest in their neighborhood and their emerging understandings of themselves in relation to the people in the neighborhood. We discuss one response in some detail in order to illustrate what the children did with this task.

Along with the three pictures of her wishes, the child’s written captions in Figure 11.1 deal with her relationship to the neighborhood practices of the community—to trees in front of her house, the need to be quiet in consideration of her elderly next-door neighbors, and the desire to have children like herself living

![Figure 11.1](image-url)  
**FIGURE 11.1**  Student drawing and captions illustrating local issues
nearby. Her writing and drawing suggest how she conceptualizes significant elements of her world. They raise questions too about who she perceives as being like her. We can guess that these may be oblique references to race, ethnicity, and gender because her picture depicts three girls standing together in the foreground. Significantly, what we do know is that she already perceives of herself as different from other children who live in the area. Thus, her representations of her wishes are related to how she experiences identity, citizenship, and locality in her everyday life.

In the two frames in Figure 11.1 that deal with something that worries her and something that makes her angry, this young student gives an account of two neighborhood practices that concern her—the unkempt garden of a “strange man” and the trash dropped by neighbors in front of her house. In the picture of the overgrown garden, a small figure is shown separated from the offending garden, perhaps the child writer herself observing from a safe distance. In the final frame, a figure pushing a trolley is blurred as it moves past her house. There are, of course, other ways to read these texts. What is interesting, though, is the extent to which this child has used her existing representational resources to convey some critical assessments about living in the neighborhood. Other children in the class depicted other local concerns, including their fears of big dogs and bigger children who tease them, people who steal, and the lack of trees and parks. One child took up the invitation to consider more global issues (see Figure 11.2).

FIGURE 11.2  Student drawing and captions illustrating global issues
In responding to the task, this child considered environmental and economic issues—the need for water for growing things, for more trees, for houses to live in, and for people to have money.

Moving Into Local Action: What the Teacher Did Next

Marg decided to take up their concerns and work with them. She reworked her curriculum so that the children could begin actively to research the issues they had raised in their discussions, drawing, and writing. The classroom became a place where children could learn about their neighborhood and the plans for its ‘renewal’ differently. The teacher makes available, models, and directs a new range of discursive resources in the context of children becoming engaged in local action. Literacy lessons are hijacked for real-world learning and action. These children, as we will see, do not simply learn letter writing as a genre, or how to write and send a fax, or how to read a map, in case they need these skills one day. They learn these forms of literacy as social practices that are part of everyday life, in the here and now, part of living in a particular community and attending a particular school.

Children in many classrooms are invited to voice their concerns about contemporary life, though we suspect it is less common in the early childhood years of schooling. Less frequent, too, we suspect, is teachers taking up and using children’s analyses as a starting point for further inquiry and curriculum design. In Marg’s classroom many children made their concerns evident about the poor condition and low numbers of trees and parks in their neighborhood. Clearly, they had been influenced by their peer discussions because similar points (about trees, dogs, rubbish) were made across the students’ artifacts. It is important to know that in South Australia, the driest state in the driest continent, trees cannot be taken for granted. Residents pay high water rates. Indeed, the more affluent suburbs are often euphemistically described as the ‘leafy suburbs’; the condition and quantity of trees can be considered as an ad hoc social class marker.

What Marg did first was to copy the relevant page from the local street map and mark out a perimeter that included most of the houses of the children who lived in the neighborhood. A few lived too far away to be included, but they had visited friends in the vicinity, so all the children were familiar with the area. With maps and pencils in hand, these young students, led by their teacher, walked a section of the local neighborhood, as marked out on their maps, recording the numbers and conditions of trees. However, it became clear that the children were not only concerned with trees but about major changes that were planned for their area as part of the urban renewal project. Marg thought that many of them had heard their parents talking about plans to knock down local houses, which might mean that some families would have to move away. In fact, some of the children’s houses were likely targets for demolition because roads were to be redirected. As Marg explained: “They’ve grown up there for most of their lives, and that’s a big
thing to have your house knocked down … They were really interested to find out more about it. They wanted the facts. They wanted information.”

As they walked the local area, the children, armed with their local knowledge as well as their pencils, began to discuss who was responsible for the state of the trees. In Marg’s words: “They know what they like and what they don’t like. You know, just walking around and looking at the state of the trees … that had come up, because somebody had said that they had trees in front of their house that were broken down. And somebody said, ‘Oh yea, somebody tried to burn the tree in front of my house down …’ Well, they don’t know about the Council, but as we talked about things, it came up, ‘Well, who looks after these trees?’”

Guided by Marg, the students extended their fieldwork investigations about trees into broader questions about the local area and called on the experience and knowledge of their families. And their teacher began to systematically gather information from local community organizations. As a result, they learned more about the urban renewal project, and they began to conduct opinion polls with family members and neighbors about issues such as relocation and demolition. With their teacher’s help they wrote and sent faxes to local authorities to obtain more information about the plans for their area. Some of the information they gleaned was to have direct effects on class members, as Marg explained, referring to her map of the neighborhood and the council plans: “There’s a little girl here (pointing to location on the map), right on the corner [next to the school], right where the development’s going to go, the road swings around [through her house], and it’s all going to be lakes and wetlands … We got the plans, and it was just like, ‘Well that’s where my house its.’”

These children were learning how to conduct research and how to use information and communication genres and technologies in context. Having voiced their concerns about conditions of the trees, they went on to understand (in part) how the problem had eventuated and what could be done about it. They redesigned the local reserve as they would like to see it and sent their labeled diagrams and drawings to people in charge of the urban renewal project.

The labeled designs for the local reserve indicated that the children took up this opportunity for redesign very differently, but there were also some shared features, including drains, lights, trees, and rubbish bins. In these designs, the children indicate their different views of the way their new improved surrounding might look. Figure 11.3 depicts a well-resourced environment with swings, slides, an ice-cream shop, basketball hoop, tunnel, and hammock. On the surface, it is an unsurprising representation of a children’s playground. Yet the inclusion of the rubbish bins and lights, along with the healthy trees, gave one pause. These children were continuing from their earlier analysis of what worried them in their neighborhood—rubbish, inadequate shade, and a sense of mess. Here there are some new elements too in the inclusion of drains and lights. Lights appear in both these examples. In Figure 11.4, which in some ways is disconcertingly austere and a modest proposal, by any measure, there is a
plan for regular lighting, regular trees, pathways, and a drain in the road. In this drawing this child’s capacity to imagine an ordered and tidy world is clear. This is in stark contrast to many parts of the students’ lived environment at that time, as we have indicated earlier. In their redesigns, the children give some indications of the ways they envisage an improved local environment. One gets some sense of how they are reading their world.
Marg did not stop there. The children’s products were sent to the project officers and council members involved with the upkeep and changes to the local area. Students invited key personnel from the council and urban renewal project to the school to speak with them and respond to their questions. They investigated the school budget and possible locations for some new plants and researched which trees might be grown in which locations and the benefits and drawbacks of different trees. In this curriculum students were learning to do much more than voice an opinion; they were learning to go deeper into an urgent local and school issue. It is worth noting here also that students’ written and oral messages were supplemented, or overtaken in some cases, by their visual productions. This integrated and critical curriculum gives attention to the environment, communication, mapping, number work, reading, writing, inquiry-based learning. More than that, these forms of knowledge and skills are gained by exploring matters that concern the quality of children’s everyday lives. Subsequently, students engaged with complex issues of everyday life, moving from the local to the global and back to the local, connecting with community members and workers and taking local action …

Children and Their Place in the World

Our senses of who we are, our identities, are inextricably interwoven with place. … Our identity in, and as, narrative is constructed in part from, and with, our stories about the physical and social place from which we have come (Bruner, 1987). In Marg’s work, we find the part of ourselves that tells of place as important, and feels that this is so, and we see the possibility that we might understand more about how place—as material and social, as embodied and narrativized—matters not only to the children in Marg’s class but also to us.

Mayol (1998, p. 16) emphasizes that many cultural practices of neighborhood are behavioral, that is, they are inscribed in the body: “The body is support for all the gestural messages that articulate … conformity: it is a blackboard on which is written—and this rendered legible—the respect for codes, or the deviation from them, in relation to the (neighborhood) system of behaviors.” We find the notion of the body as the site for practice helps us to make sense of how we sometimes feel out of place and in place. But, as importantly, we understand that together with this embodiedness, life narratives are also dynamic; they are continually retold and rewritten.

As feminists, we have experienced how critically reflecting on our stories in the company of other women helped us to see past the individual life trajectories to the common and socially produced women’s life tales (cf. Davies, 1992; Kamler, 1995). The new storying helped us not only to re-interpret past events but through this, to re-shape what we were thinking about our future. People can and do, through the process of renarrativization, bring themselves to new positions from which new directions and new actions may be possible. Renarrativation mobilizes available resources to tell a different life story.
It is this dynamic and ongoing renarrativation process that perhaps lurks behind the term ‘empowering’ that is often linked to classroom projects such as Marg’s. Marg made available to children, through their writing classroom, a way to link their social sense of neighborhood ‘propriety’ with knowledge, networks, and actions in which they took civic responsibility, worked cooperatively, and lobbied and organized as social activists. They were active citizens. Marg thus provided to the children a set of ‘power-full’ identity narrative resources different from those evidenced in their material neighborhood environment of neglect and individualized impotence. These are resources they may use in the future.

Mayol (1998) argues that the practices of neighborhood contribute to social understandings: he calls this not social “know-how” but “knowing how to be” (p. 15). Neighborhood is one of the first places, and an everyday place, in which children encounter separate ‘others’ and learn ‘how to be’ with them through and in the use of common everyday space. The neighborhood is a place in which one learns about being social, about what it is to be a member of a social group, and about how that society works. Thus, Marg’s lessons are developing in students’ practices of collectively ‘owning’ the neighborhood. Her “curriculum of public spaces” (Nespor, 2000) has to do with developing aspects of the spatialized cultural and social capital that count—how to find out what is going on, how to locate decision makers, how to present collective ideas and opinions, how to take action rather than just be passively ‘done to.’

In Marg’s lessons, the children were embodied social actors who were not just done to. She sees that her lesson has had some effects on the children’s stories of who they are and what they do: “I can remember one of the kids … she said after … ‘Oh, Council, that’s a place where you can go and find out things’ … and I thought that was interesting, even if we didn’t get very far. She felt that they’d actually done something and it hadn’t been imposed. And another kid said, ‘Oh yes, I’d go to the Council next time I want to do something or find out something’ … and that was interesting; they’d do something, not just sit there waiting to be told ….”

…. By situating hers and the children’s literacy practice in the local community, Marg offers these young people opportunities to develop literacies for active citizenship as they research, seek answers, and design better places to live. And although this is serious business, it offers the children more options than resistance or acquiescence to the status quo. And as Marg put it, “We didn’t get real bogged down in the project; I didn’t want it to be all about dreary gloom and doom.” In this context the children’s plans for the new local reserve become especially important. Here critical literacy involves local action and imagination, interrogation of the ways things are, and design of how things might be otherwise.
CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMON CORE

I use the third-grade CCS as it relates to the reading, writing and speaking standards. Because of space constraints, the authors could not include every detail in Marg’s instructional practices. The reader is challenged to infer other language arts practiced by the students, not made explicit in the article. The standards below reflect, in part, my inferences about the kinds of reading, writing and speaking teaching that Marg did to support the students’ work.

Student Learning Activities: read and used maps; generated a problem related to a community issue; conducted opinion polls in the community; sent written requests via fax to local officials; redesigned the public space with diagrams, labels; engaged in discussion with city officials who students invited to the class; studied the city budget related to the urban renewal project; collected and analyzed information from local community groups on aspects of their plan.

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.1** Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.2** Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.3** Describe the relationship between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.4** Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.6** Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.7** Use information gained from illustrations (e.g., maps, photographs) and the words in a text to demonstrate understanding of the text (e.g., where, when, why, and how key events).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.1a** Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation and other information known about the topic to explore ideas under discussion.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.1b** Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., gaining the floor in respectful ways, listening to others with care, speaking one at a time about the topics and texts under discussion).
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.1c Ask questions to check understanding of information presented, stay on topic, and link their comments to the remarks of others.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.1d Explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.2 Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.3 Ask and answer questions about information from a speaker, offering appropriate elaboration and detail.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.4 Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking clearly at an understandable pace.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.3.6 Speak in complete sentences when appropriate to task and situation in order to provide requested detail or clarification.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.2.b Develop the topic with facts, definitions, and details.

COMMENTARY
This is an exemplary interdisciplinary critical literacy project. It is inextricably grounded in students’ lives and their community. These second and third-grade students created texts through their writing, speaking, reading, map making, art, and testimony to the city council. With Marg’s help, the students critiqued and responded to an urban renewal project and re-constructed power relations with city officials that demonstrated the students’ emerging critical consciousness.

References


In a multiage second/third-grade classroom, students engage in an interdisciplinary unit on child labor. They learned the history of child labor in the US, current child labor in third-world countries, read and wrote about the subject, experienced ‘child labor’ through simulations, wrote letters in protest and engaged in other actions. This chapter exemplifies the productive dimension of critical literacy as students create texts through their writing, speaking, poetry, and political actions … texts that, themselves, reflect critical consciousness. You might notice the heightened level of engagement by the students in this unit. How would you describe the emotions of the students? What was it about this unit that influenced students’ engagement and their emotional investment in this work?

“I have something to share,” announced Kaya, as she proudly unfolded a piece of paper titled, “The Pants and Shirt List.”

“I took out all my clothes and looked at the labels. I wrote down where they were made.” With some help with pronunciation, she read off her list. Out of 30 items of clothing, only three were made in the United States. The others were made in Asian or Latin-American countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, the Philippines, Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

“Most of them were made in Asia,” she said. When I asked her why she thought so, she said, “I think a lot of poor people live there.”

Juan Pedro was straining his hand to be called on.

“And the companies can pay them just a little and then the companies get more money!”
After years of thinking about doing a unit on child labor, I had finally taken the plunge. Other years I had hit on the topic when teaching about children’s rights or migrant workers, for instance, but until now I had not put a whole curriculum together on the subject for my multi-age second and third-grade classroom. This year, inspired by a friend, Mary Modaff, who created a unit on child labor for her 4/5 classroom and by my student teacher, Kat Findley, I worked with Kat to pull together resources and brainstorm activities.

Like most people from the United States, my first images of children working were kids who got up early to help milk cows or feed the chickens on a family farm, young teens who babysat to earn extra money, or high school students who worked at fast food restaurants. My perceptions of children working expanded on my first trip to Mexico, where I saw young children selling Chiclets in the town square and others trying to make a few pesos on the beach by offering anything from mango slices to a song-and-dance performance to the tourists. I admit that I thought these children’s efforts at making money were quaint and rather endearing until I ventured past the tourist strip to witness the poverty of their living conditions: cardboard and tin shacks facing dirt streets where children ran through dank sewage water.

On subsequent trips to Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala, I saw more of the darker side of children working: young girls up at 5 a.m., carrying bricks on their heads up a steep hill to a building construction site and teenagers working long hours in the maquilas without basic rights like bathroom privileges or sick leave. Finally, in Nepal, I saw some of the many children who spend their childhood toiling under the hot sun breaking up the rocks in stone quarries to make gravel.

As a teacher, I wanted my students to be able to understand this dark side of child labor, how different these children’s lives are from theirs. I hoped that they would develop empathy with children who don’t have basic rights that even children in our school, where 60 percent of students come from low income families, take for granted. I wanted them to think critically about consumer spending in the United States and how our gains might be other people’s losses. And I hoped that this unit could ultimately inspire them to take action and instill a lifelong interest in such issues.

But could second and third graders understand the complexities and handle the feelings generated by the topic of child labor? I wouldn’t want them to place blame for the inhumane treatment of children on the children’s parents or on Third World countries. And I hoped they could understand the difference between labor that is a violation of fundamental rights and labor that contributes to a family’s farm or business. Would they see that the abolition of child labor would not end the fundamental problems of unequal distribution of income, that having adults perform the same jobs in inhumane conditions is not an answer? Many adults lack this depth of understanding, so I wasn’t sure how my students would do. But I was soon surprised at how well they grasped aspects of the issue.
Kat planned the first week with a focus on the history of child labor in the United States. Students made a web on labor in general and brainstormed children’s rights, read and discussed the United Nations Children’s Rights document, and learned to differentiate rights from privileges. We had discussed the basic needs of animals previously, and that helped them when we started to discuss human needs and rights. Then the students learned about the history of child labor in the United States. They studied books such as *Fire at the Triangle Factory* (Young, 1995), *Danger in the Breaker* (Welch, 1991), and *Trouble at the Mines* (Rappaport, 1989). We read aloud *Mother Jones and the March of the Mill Children* (Parton, 1925) and *Working Children* (Saller, 1998). With this literature, they also gained a basic understanding of labor concepts such as unions, boycotts and strikes.

I began the following week by reading aloud a poem written in Spanish and English about a girl who sells chocolates on the street, “The Girl with Chocolates” or “La nina de los chocolates” (Nye, 1998). I revealed the poem one stanza at a time, asking students to guess what the poem was about.

_“A little girl in sandals is walking on the avenue. Her hair, so long and black, shines, and turns deep sea-blue. She wears a green dress with seven flowers printed on the front and carries a box of chocolates.”_

After reading the first two stanzas, students were thinking that the poem was about a girl who had bought some chocolates for her mom’s birthday, or maybe that the girl had spent money on chocolates for herself. But as we read on, the students realized that she was working and lacked the basic rights (education and play) that they had agreed all children should have.

_“At six years old, school is her only drama but she must sell her chocolates to care for her brothers and sisters ….”_

Since we had studied child labor in the context of US history, I was curious to hear when the students thought the poem took place. Interestingly, the children whose families had immigrated from Mexico or South America agreed that it takes place now. But the majority of the children were convinced that the poem took place in the past.

After lunch, Kat read the story of Iqbal Masih from *Stolen Dreams* (Parker, 1997). The students listened intently to the description of the work of Iqbal and other children in Pakistan who were bonded to owners of carpet factories, destined to work years for three cents a day to pay off their parents’ debts. They learned how these children work for pennies, tying millions of knots in coarse twine in the process of creating carpets that sell for more than $2,000 in the United States. The conditions are brutal, as children work as many as 16 hours a day in severe heat and if they protest, as did Iqbal, they are beaten and tied to their chairs. In 1992, Iqbal spoke out at a meeting supporting the proposal of a law that would ban child labor in the carpet factories. He then broke out of his bondage, went to school, and traveled around to support other bonded child laborers and to gain better conditions for workers in carpet factories. When the class learned that Iqbal got shot and killed at age 12, they were shocked.
“I know what happened!” said Rosalie. “He was speaking out against child labor and they just wanted to get back at him.”

“That’s just like Dr. King,” added Tara. “He worked for it to be fair for all people, too, and then he got killed.” Throughout the unit, students made such connections between child labor and struggles against inequality that they had learned about in other contexts. A challenge that I had confronted in teaching about the Civil Rights Movement—to enable students to understand that it was a movement, not one man, that led to change—resurfaced during this unit. Like that of Martin Luther King, Jr., the story of Iqbal overshadowed discussions we had of grassroots efforts to confront the issue of child labor. I didn’t succeed in scheduling a speaker from a campus anti-sweatshop organization, but I plan to include grassroots organizers when I teach this in the future.

From the Internet site of the International Labor Organization (ILO, n.d.), I copied scenarios of children working, some deemed by the ILO as “child labor,” others not. From their knowledge of child labor in the United States and the story of Iqbal, students helped make lists of what did and did not constitute child labor.

For jobs that weren’t classified as child labor, the students agreed that working was a choice, that they would be able to go to school, that they would be saving their money for extra things, and that they would be paid more. For child labor, students listed the following: not a choice, can’t go to school, working for the basic needs of their family, sometimes being hurt, long hours, and low pay.

I read the scenarios from the ILO website and the students categorized them. I had been concerned that students would confuse doing household chores and homework with child labor, but, in fact, they had a very clear idea of the differences between the two. I did, however, want to introduce the concept that not all kids who work do it under the harsh conditions illustrated by the story of Iqbal or the scenarios of brick layers and clothing manufacturers from the ILO site. I showed a segment from the video, Central American Children Speak: Our Lives and Our Dreams (Resource Centre for the Americas, 1993), which depicts the life of a Nicaraguan boy who sells bread on the street for his family business. He talks about the pleasures and the struggles of his job. He goes to school part-time and plays stickball with his friends. The class agreed that his situation was different from their definition of “child labor” because he was able to go to school and play, because he enjoyed aspects of his job, and wasn’t physically harmed from it. We also read aloud daily from The Most Beautiful Place (Cameron, 1993), a book that reveals a similar situation in which a Guatemalan boy shines shoes to help meet his family’s basic needs. He teaches himself to read and when his grandmother realizes that he has missed a year of school, he is able to follow his dream of getting an education.

Later in the week, I passed out copies of photos from Stolen Dreams. I suggested students describe not only what they saw in the photo, but also what they imagined the children in the photos felt and what their lives were like. I reminded them to think about children’s rights and how we had defined child labor the day before. I didn’t do any major editing, except for helping students cut out
extraneous pronouns and connecting words. If students seemed to be stuck, I prompted them by asking them to describe what they saw and felt. Their poems were remarkable, both in content and form.

Roberto, only a month in the United States, wrote about a photo of a child construction worker in Kathmandu, Nepal.

no trae zapatos
saca tierra de un hoyo
carga cosas pesadas
trabaja entre el calor
trabaja todos los días
le pagan poco dinero
no juega porque no tiene tiempo
no va a la escuela
no come hasta la noche
no tiene bicicleta
es muy pobre
con el dinero que le dan
no le alcanza para comer
no tiene cama
tiene una casa de adobe
quiere vivir en un país bien
que tenga para comer …

she doesn’t wear shoes
removes dirt from a hole
carries heavy things
works in the heat
works every day
they pay her little money
she doesn’t play because there isn’t time
doesn’t go to school
doesn’t eat until nighttime
doesn’t have a bike
is very poor
the money that she earns
is not enough for food
doesn’t have a bed
has a house made of mud
wants to live in a better country
where there is food to eat …
Where Clothing Is Made

The next day we examined where our own clothing is made. Most students guessed their shirts were made in the United States “because that’s the closest.” Cassandra said that they must be made in the United States because people in the other countries speak different languages and wouldn’t be able to put English words on the shirts. Tara, however, said that most of the things around her house were made in China, so her shirt was probably made there, too. Then several others followed suit by guessing China. Evan, who has politically astute parents, was agonizing over the “right” answer. He tried to turn his shirt around to see the label. Prevented from doing that, he deduced that his shirt must be made in the United States because he got it in a public museum, rather than in a store. I directed students to find partners and read each others’ labels, writing the countries’ names on index cards. One at a time they read their cards, and we found the countries on the map. Although we had a fair share made in the United States (5 out of 18), the students were surprised to discover that their shirts were made so far away, most in Asia and others in Central America. Evan’s museum t-shirt was made in Honduras. I asked the class why they thought that their shirts were made in countries so far away, instead of in the United States.

“Maybe they made them better there,” someone guessed. “I guess the United States pays them to make them there,” said another student. I told them that I had a video of a factory in Honduras where some shirts like the ones they had on were made, sewn by children 13 to 15 years old.

“What does your big sister do during the day,” I asked MaiSee.

“She goes to school,” she said.

“Well, these girls work in factory, called a maquila or sweatshop, sewing shirts. As you watch the video, notice if they are getting their basic needs and rights met.”

We then watched part of Zoned for Slavery (Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights, 1995), a video in which a reporter sneaks into a maquila in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and interviews the girls about their working conditions. The girls are also filmed and interviewed at their homes and on their way to the factory. Although the video is geared for high school students, I found that the images of the girls’ lives in and out of the factory and their own words spoke for themselves. There were a few parts that I skipped because they were not age appropriate, including the ending segment that shows how the girls were given birth control pills disguised as vitamins to prevent pregnancy and thereby increase productivity.

The students groaned as they heard that the girls need to pay for their bus transportation and their lunch out of their meager salary. They paid close attention to translations of the girls’ responses as they related the working conditions in the factory.
After the video, I asked students to share reactions. As the students spoke, I encouraged their conjectures but did not add much beyond repeating or rephrasing their ideas and encouraging them to explore further.

“That’s not fair,” said Cassandra. “They can’t even go to the bathroom or get a drink of water! I think we need to get all those girls on a plane and bring them here!”

After talking about the impracticality of her suggestions, other students offered ideas.

“We should give money to the poor people so they wouldn’t have to work,” said Juan Pedro.

Rosalie added, “I have an idea. Don’t buy any shirts from those companies. Then they won’t make so much money!” I asked the students if they remembered that that was called a boycott. Several did, mentioning the Montgomery Bus Boycott as an example.

“But we’d have to get thousands and thousands of people to join in,” argued Evan. “That would be hard.” I shared that students on campus had organized a boycott against the Gap to protest child labor and poor working conditions. Sheyna had another idea. “Write a letter to George Bush, saying that child labor is bad.”

Cassandra interjected, “But he doesn’t answer his letters. It’s just a secretary or something who writes all the answers. Remember how we all got the same letter back from him last year?”

She added, “I think that we should make the clothes cost what the workers make—27 cents—that way the company wouldn’t make any money and they’d have to give the workers more money so that they could make the shirts cost more.”

Tara said, “But George Bush could shut down all the companies that use child labor.”

Evan said, “But child labor is already against the law in the United States. We should make it a law that we can’t sell things here that are made by child labor in another country.”

“I know what we should do,” interjected Cassandra. “We should tell the whole school about child labor. We could make fliers telling people to boycott companies who use child labor.”

“And send letters to companies saying that we don’t buy their shirt because they use child labor,” added Rosalie.

The momentum of wanting to take action followed into the next days and the following weeks as the students wrote letters to the newspaper, the president’s wife, and companies protesting child labor. I had started off the letter-writing activity as an exercise in persuasive writing, but students chose to write their letters during draft book (free writing) periods and any other available time.
Opinion differed as to who would be the best audience for their letters of protest. I encouraged dialogue but allowed each student to make his or her own decision. Juan Pedro, another immigrant from Mexico, showed more interest in this topic than any other we’ve studied. He became a leader, sharing his knowledge of the lives of working children and his ideas about how the companies benefit from the low-paid workers. He suggested we write to the local newspapers so that we could tell more people our concerns. At least half the class followed his example, many writing their second or third letter.

Tying Knots

As the students continued to work on editing and typing their letters, we did other activities related to child labor. We did a simulation activity in which students were assigned a task measuring or tying knots in thick twine, supposedly as part of a rug making factory. Kat and I took on the roles of the managers. The students were very serious about doing their tasks within strict guidelines of no talking, no drinks or bathroom breaks, no mistakes, no getting up from their seats. Any breaking of the rules or imperfect product reduced their pay (five pennies). We broke after 15 minutes, concerned that some students were getting upset, but some said, “That was fun. Let’s do it again.” Other students had more serious responses. “That felt real,” said Rosalie. “I’m never going back to that place. I was so tired. My fingers were sore from tying all those knots.”

Cassandra said, “That burned my fingers really hard. And I didn’t like the owners. They were too bossy. It wasn’t my fault that I couldn’t cut the string right.”

Most students complained that they were thirsty (it was a very hot day), sore, and bored.

MaiSee said, “The owners wanted us to do all their work. You had to work fast or else not get your pay. It would be really, really hard if you had to go to the bathroom and you couldn’t go.”

Tara said, “That felt real. It made my paper cuts hurt and my hands hurt real bad.”

Kaya guessed, “I bet you were doing this so we could feel how the workers felt!”

We also used the International Labor Organization website to submit the students’ daily schedules and then compare these with the daily schedules of three child laborers. From that information, students filled in circle graphs which graphically illustrated the differences in their daily lives from those of a cigarette maker, a brick layer, and a clothing worker.

“All they get to do is work, sleep and eat!” commented MaiSee. They wrote each activity in terms of fractions of the day and also completed word problems related to their working hours and small salaries.
In the following days, two more students brought in lists of where their clothes were made, including Sheyna, who let it be known that she hates doing homework.

**TV Turn-Off Week**

Our child labor unit spilled over into TV Turn-Off Week. We examined tricks that advertisers use to convince children to buy their products through a video, *Buy Me That!* (Consumer Union, 1991), and discussions of their experiences. Students broke into groups to design and perform role plays of advertisements for a Nike sweatshirt, Adidas tennis shoes, a Digimon toy made in China, and a Gap t-shirt. After their roleplays of the ads, students told the truth about their products.

Did they understand all the complexities of child labor and all the connections between Third World poverty and corporate gain? No, but they demonstrated through their conversations, written work, and oral presentations that they not only developed empathy for the working children around the world, but also that they were beginning to see where company profit and consumer choices played a part. And I believe the unit had special meaning to my Latino students. Juan Pedro and Roberto, in particular, showed by their level of oral and written participation that the subject was relevant to their experiences. Finally, I saw some of the best writing of the year in students’ poems and persuasive essays. Not only were they willing to write, but they were also enthusiastic about spending extra time on the computer to produce finished pieces. The enthusiasm, I felt, came from the conviction that the writing was for an important purpose. The students were engaged in an effort to help stem injustice. It could be argued that their impact will be small, but I believe they won’t forget the lessons learned about taking action.

As we finished up the school year, the topic of labor continued to come up. Kat brought in information on Global Exchange’s campaign against the use of child slavery and fair wages for adult workers in cocoa plantations on the Ivory Coast. We discussed the campaign to speak out on the issue by responding to the question of what new color M&M should create by voting for free-trade chocolate. Later that day, Tara found an ad in a teen magazine that ironically said, “Want to make a difference? M&M needs you! To vote your color!”

At the end of the year, a teacher stopped in to talk to the class about her trip to Guatemala. She showed us a picture of young girls boarding a bus.

“Where do you think these are going?” she asked. In fact, they were not going to school, as we all had guessed, but to work in a clothing factory. She recounted the inhumane treatment they experienced and the lack of basic rights. The class surprised her with their knowledge about sweatshops.

In the midst of our discussion, I noticed that kids were growing restless. I started to reprimand them, then stopped. My students were twisting their t-shirts around to investigate their labels.
CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMON CORE

As an interdisciplinary unit, there are a plethora of standards across disciplines that appear to be addressed in this unit. I use the third-grade standards in reading, writing and mathematics.

SLA: read books, articles and videos; learned subject specific vocabulary; engaged in related discussion and writing; compared child labor with other social movements, such as the US civil rights movement; analyzed advertisements for how they seek to position the reader/consumer; wrote letters to protest child labor; considered audiences for their letters; wrote poems and persuasive texts; interpreted circle graphs that compared the schedule of child laborers and the students’ school schedule; completed math story problems containing fractions concepts that illustrated the circle graph information

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.1** Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.2** Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.3** Describe the relationship between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.4** Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.5** Use text features and search tools (e.g., key words, sidebars, hyperlinks) to locate information relevant to a given topic efficiently.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.6** Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.7** Use information gained from illustrations (e.g., maps, photographs) and the words in a text to demonstrate understanding of the text (e.g., where, when, why, and how key events occur).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.9** Compare and contrast the most important points and key details presented in two texts on the same topic.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.1a** Introduce the topic or text they are writing about, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure that lists reasons.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.1b** Provide reasons that support the opinion.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.1d Provide a concluding statement or section.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.2b Develop the topic with facts, definitions, and details.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.2d Provide a concluding statement or section.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.3b Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.3d Provide a sense of closure.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.4 With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task and purpose.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.5 With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, and editing.
• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.
• CCSS.Math.Content.3.NF.A.3 Explain equivalence of fractions in special cases, and compare fractions by reasoning about their size.
• CCSS.Math.Content.4.NF.B.3d Solve word problems involving addition and subtraction of fractions referring to the same whole and having like denominators, e.g., by using visual fraction models and equations to represent the problem (from fourth-grade standards).

COMMENTARY

Kate’s unit effectively illustrates the intersection of student engagement and curriculum that is conceptually rich and grounded in community life. Quoting from her chapter, “The students groaned as they heard that the girls need to pay for their bus transportation and their lunch out of their meager salary. They paid close attention to translations of the girls’ conditions in the factory.” When curricular activity is purposeful and interesting, this appears to be a ‘friendlier’ context for teacher instruction of the Common Core. By friendlier context, I mean that students will be more apt to engage in skill or strategy instruction when this information is consequential and related to broader unit goals that depend on this knowledge. I will return to this idea in my wrap-up chapter (14). In Kate’s unit, like that of Marg in Chapter 11, what makes students’ self-generated texts especially critical is their intention to speak ‘truth to power.’
References

The heartfelt excitement and care that students showed in Marg and Kate’s classes, described in Chapters 11 and 12, was the reason I became a teacher. I imagine it is the reason many of you became teachers, as well. Let me theorize a bit on some components or features that these two critical literacy units have in common:

First, the units both entailed a variety of literacy resources and subject areas, facilitating the teachers’ opportunity to address any set of standards.

Second, the units engaged students as participants in solving or addressing problems with real-life implications for people’s lives.

Third, the teachers listened to students’ questions and initiatives, took them seriously, so the trajectory of these units reflected both teacher and students’ interests.

Fourth, both units conceptualized literacy more broadly than the traditional reading-writing-speaking/listening … to, instead, a set of cultural practices that student-citizens need in order to participate effectively in their communities. It is this slight but powerful shift in our definition of ‘literacy’ that influenced, perhaps, transformational learning experiences for these students. Of course, students need the first two literacy resources (Luke and Freebody); no one argues with this. But without the second two resources, especially the critical piece, schools will tend to stay stuck in irrelevance and boredom for our students, reflecting how Goodlad (2004) described schools as “neither harsh and punitive or warm and joyful; it might be described most accurately as flat” (p. 108).

So, if there is one practical idea with which to end this section, it is this: Start small, with modest critical literacy teaching, like those in the early chapters. But keep your eyes open to issues and problems in your community and beyond, the kinds of issues that might be of interest to your students. Do your research, organize resources, keep one eye on the CCS, ‘pitch’ the idea to your students, listen to their ideas and then observe them carefully to see if and when the fire lights.
This page intentionally left blank
PART III

Understanding the Micro-Political Contexts of Teaching Critical Literacy
This page intentionally left blank
DEVELOPING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Children and Teachers Reading Wide Awake

Patrick Shannon

Patrick Shannon works with teachers and wannabe teachers of young children in public schools, private schools and a summer reading camp. He seeks to provoke critical reading in their everyday lives with the understanding that children need models for any literacy practices they might enact. I invite you to notice the five children highlighted in the chapter. Unrehearsed and spontaneous, the inclination of these children to think deeply about social issues seems incongruous when compared to teacher-led conversations that often occur in kindergarten classes. Can we expect more from our students, in terms of their thinking and engagement when doing school-sponsored activity? And what are the instructional conditions that might promote deep thinking from even our youngest students?

Diane: “The scarlet macaw is the brightest bird in the rainforest.”
Mark: “Parakeets are colorful.”
Victoria: “If there are no trees in the rainforest, there will be no habitat for birds.”
Ryan: “That’s not good.”
J. P.: “They cut the trees to make farms. That’s good.”
Diane: “Not for the birds.”

This is an excerpt from a discussion among five kindergarten and first-grade graduates, who were attending the Summer Reading Camp on my university campus. Two are homeschooled because of autism, one is homeschooled for religious reasons, and two are enrolled in a public school. All came to Camp in
order to read and write because someone is worried about their progress, and all were engaged in the production of a museum exhibit about the Amazon rainforest as a habitat. These and some older primary-grade students would design and construct the exhibit based on their research, and then invite their families, the other groups at Camp, and faculty and staff in our college to visit its opening.

I start with this transcript because it demonstrates that young children can think and not just according to developmental schemes. Diane makes a claim. Mark offers a comparison. Victoria presents an if/then proposition. Ryan evaluates. J. P. contextualizes. And Diane then takes another’s point of view. The statements are based on individuals’ research during Camp, pawing in books, searching on websites, and watching YouTubes. Their statements are declarations. If you could listen to their tones, you’d notice that each is not quite sure what the others will say next. However, across six statements they demonstrate that not only can they think alone, they can think collectively—they prove to themselves that they are smarter as a group than each is as an individual. A very first step for teachers of literacy is the expectation that children—even young ones—can think.

Look closer, and you’ll observe them thinking critically and developing social theory. That is, in the frame of habitat, they move from nature to political ecology and, then, to taking stands on the topic. Diane and Mark talk about two types of bird they’ve studied, noting what makes them distinctive. Victoria interjects that nature is not natural or wild but, instead, is a human artifact—the forests of Amazon are being logged—disrupting Diane and Mark’s ‘nature walk.’ Ryan sides with the birds, opposing the unnamed loggers, who Victoria positions as harming nature. J. P. puts faces on the loggers and adds a layer of tension to the discussion—can’t people work on nature for human good—food in this case? Diane reiterates some ‘costs’ of J. P.’s sense of ‘progress.’ Together they are explaining to each other and anyone within earshot why the Amazon works in a particular way. A second step for teachers, then, is to see that children can take the world seriously.

How did the graduates learn to think critically and develop social theory? The short answer: They watched and listened to adults do and talk about these practices. I work with teachers and wannabe teachers of young children in public schools, private schools, and a summer reading camp. I seek to provoke critical reading in their everyday lives with the understanding that children need models for any literacy practices that they might enact. We start with three assumptions: all institutions present lessons concerning what we should know, who we should be, and what we should value; these lessons always involve texts (broadly defined) that are supposed to be read in a particular way; and these lessons and texts are always political—intended to position us and to capture our allegiance. Think ads, schools, and religions to be sure, but also sports, digital games, films, and maps as well. As readers, our job is to decide if we wish to
accept those proposed positions. As writers, we decide how we will participate in these lessons. As teachers, we demonstrate this reading *wide awake* for our students (Shannon, 2011).

After a description of reading wide awake, I develop those three points further through an example of a text that positions the students and the teachers at school, and I then share two examples of a teacher and wannabes reading everyday texts critically. In a fashion similar to the Summer Camp graduates, I think teachers construct theories about how such reading works by observing examples and trying it themselves as they reflect on their efforts. Direct instruction would pull these processes apart, determine an ‘optimal’ order for everyone to follow, and teach each element separately. As you can see in the graduates’ Camp discussion, however, they have already assembled many ‘parts’ of reading wide awake in simple forms and use it when permitted. One set of challenges for teachers of critical literacy is to bring their own critical practices to a sufficient level of consciousness in order to demonstrate and talk about their reading, to recognize critical practices among children and, then, to provide feedback that supports further learning.

**We All Read Like (6-Year-Old) Diane, to Varying Degrees**

These five young readers employ their prior knowledge of print, image, and sound in order to construct representations of the rainforest. In the short span of their discussion, they show that they’ve encountered multiple readings (interpretations) of the same texts. Diane and Mark read the birds differently. Victoria reads the context around the birds. Ryan concurs and J. P. differs with Victoria’s reading. Within this mix, they push reading closer to what Charles Lemert (2008) calls ‘sociological competence,’ making sense of life in order to live it daily, and what C. Wright Mills labels ‘sociological imagination,’ understanding that the personal always has social implications and connections. Lemert summarizes both in his book *Social Things*:

> To learn to live the sociological life is to learn to accept things as they come down, and to imagine why they are what they are. We live now in a time when life requires us to refrain from jumping too quickly to conclusions shaped by what we once believed to be true and good.

*(p. x)*

Lemert uses *things* as a count noun to stand for all affairs, concerns, ideas, and objects. Everything is social, he argues, touched by human choices and actions. Nothing built, private, or natural should escape our consideration, because all are influenced by the social. Lemert wants us to read everything as representation and think about why it comes to us in that form and what its consequences might be. He cautions us to read and think carefully and deeply because some past stories
that we’ve told ourselves about those consequences are neither accurate nor help-ful to us or to others. Diane and her peers read texts about rainforests in order to negotiate their daily lives (build the museum exhibit as a display of their social competence at Camp) and to connect their lives to those of others by thinking about possible and likely consequences (consider logging and its effects on habitats for birds and people—sociological imagination about ecology in their lives).

We all read social things as texts in our everyday lives across media (print, radio, television, internet, and live and visual arts) and modes (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic). We bring our background experiences, thoughts, and values to bear during these readings—and therefore our readings are incomplete, contradictory at times, and necessarily biased. Our past and present extend, and also limit, our efforts to read for competence and with imagination because we are historically, socially, and economically situated among the social things that we read. There is no God’s eye view for writers, readers, or teachers. We are mere mortals working within the social frames and ideologies we’ve encountered.

We can marvel over the seriousness of the graduates’ discussion, wondering what led them to make the connections that they did. At the same time, because we have more experiences, thoughts, and values about ecology than they do, we adults notice the innocence of some of their theories. Life is more complicated than they imply—How many trees are cut? What types of farms require so many acres? Who makes decisions to cut or maintain the forests? Of course, teachers can help them to become more sophisticated in thinking about the topics of their reading.

We can recognize the potential power of reading in students’ and our lives as well. I’m not referring to the reading that is discussed in newspaper headlines, shouting about the high percentage of Americans who are ‘illiterate’ or ‘behind’ or the incessant literacy teaching that focuses on test preparation. Note that Diane, Mark, Victoria, Ryan, and J. P. are positioned as ‘struggling’ by those newspaper representations, the ideas behind them, and the school practices that follow. However, within the expectations that they can read, young learners can think, they can design, and they can build richly textured museum exhibits, and they can read multiple texts as if the quality of lives at Camp and beyond depended it. Beyond the content, we as teachers can help young learners with the practices of reading with sociological imagination—considering the social production of texts they read, the ways in which those textual representations position us, and the consequences of those positions.

Let me see if I can make this big idea clearer. The graduates engaged texts about the rainforest with social competence. They made lists of flora and fauna in the rainforest; they manipulated those lists to classify similarities and differences in order to inform their intended audience; they checked those facts to ensure their accuracy because they learned that museums have social authority as teaching tools; they generated designs for representation of their knowledge
based on their readings of museum practices; and they built an exhibit from their collective knowledge and designs. All of this reading supplied an exhibit that informed, entertained, and surprised their visitors. Beyond this reading for social competence, the children considered multiple representations of the rainforest and imagined (and evaluated) what those representations meant for people, the land, and animals across time and place. That is, they constructed a museum as a text for their audience in order to teach them about the rainforest. That representation was the product of their negotiations about what visitors should know, who they should be, and what they should value in relation to that topic. In that way, their readings, negotiations, and product were political.

Dear reader, do you think I’m reading too much into these few lines of discussion? Look carefully at what’s at stake in their comments and where they end. Diane and Mark probe what it means to label nature, establishing a hierarchy of importance and, perhaps, subsequent treatment. Their simple talk has implications for ecological policy. Victoria and J. P. puzzle over human relationships with nature, implying that this is neither a settled nor simple issue. Their two sentences have religious (dominion on earth), economic (nature as a productive resource), and scientific (duality of human and non-human systems) connotations with complicated and far-reaching consequences. All the graduates seem to recognize dangers at some level surrounding these issues. Moreover, they are not content to let someone else decide these debates for them (“that’s not good,” “that’s good,” and “not for the birds”). Michel Foucault (1983) places this sense of danger in a context:

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy, but to a hyper and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger.

(pp. 231–232)

Foucault’s “hyper and pessimistic activism” is a way to think about reading with sociological imagination. Social things aren’t bad per se, but they are dangerous because they represent a past, present, and future that could influence our daily lives in particular ways. All readings of social things provide constructs, categories, taxonomies, priorities, hierarchies, measurements, practices, and justifications, influencing our interpretations and actions and leading us in particular directions that can be dangerous—at least for some people. Logging the rainforest is dangerous for the some birds, Victoria declares, but J. P. reminds that not logging the rainforest could be dangerous also—for some people. They offer ethico-political choices for anyone listening about what they consider to be the main danger, with some placing nature as equal to, if not more important, than human needs and desires.
The children’s choices and priorities reflect the bias of their research, experiences, thoughts, and values. Because other possible readings are available, as Lemert reminds us, readers must acknowledge the possible danger even of our readings of social things. If every thing, including every reading, is dangerous, then we must be careful in daily ethico-political choices. Fundamental to that care is becoming sensitive to the power relationships behind the representations in texts. Certainly power circulated among the graduates. Diane initiates a topic; Victoria moves it in a different direction; J. P. interrupts an environmentalist moment; and Diane reasserts herself. Mark and Ryan give voice to their opinions but do not hold the floor long. These power relations that circulated among the children pale in comparison to the power of groups standing behind Victoria’s and J. P.’s representation of logging in the rainforest. Although there are more environmentalist print, websites, and resources for readers of this age, I’m not certain that environmentalists are more powerful than the loggers, farmers, landowners, international food and lumber brokers, and global consumers in decisions surrounding the Amazon rainforest as a human artifact. Those circulations of power influence the graduates’ and our reading, experiences, thoughts, and values every day.

One more thing to consider before we get to the examples: There’s a certain tension between social competence and sociological imagination. Cultures (and subcultures) establish norms over time and expect their members to comply competently. Established members work diligently to initiate and maintain these norms, going so far as to develop institutions for this work—schools, churches, political parties, news media, sports, to name a few. To a point, these norms are useful because they save members from having to reread the same social things each day in order to get things done and keep things safe and orderly. In many cases, however, cultures’ decisions on norms and competence have not served all members well, justly, or equally. We have many historical and contemporary examples in which ‘normal’ has been used as a means to protect privileged groups or to exclude others from participation. Slow development of competence or apparent divergence from cultural norms brings labels of abnormal, maladjusted, deviant, or deficient, making individuals subject to remediation, ranging from frowns, time-outs, and spankings to counseling, prisons, and exorcism in order to bring all into compliance or isolation.

Although it might be tactical to read for social competence under these normalizing circumstances, it is not always democratic. Lemert suggests that we should accept things as they come down, but that we should also work to understand why they come as they do in particular contexts. Lemert and Foucault encourage us to consider who benefits from the dominant norms and under what conditions; and to imagine how we might live together differently. No doubt, these tensions between competence and imagination surround even young children. Among the graduates, three of five families home school because they read schools as a main danger for their children. That is, they read the norms of public schooling as
inhospitable to their child’s different development. They choose Camp because they’ve read or heard about our different norms, and they imagine their children can be capable, full participants in our projects (without distributed benefits of a normal curve). Within a week or so, the graduates understand themselves to be productive citizens of the Camp, and (if their parents are to be believed) newly competent and imaginative at home as well.

**Working With Teachers**

I work with preservice teachers who are experts at reading schools with social competence. They have read their ways successfully through at least 15 years of course work, many formal high-stakes tests, and several educational institutions. These beginning teachers have become adept at demonstrating this competence for others. We work on how they might create the conditions in which students could become, and be judged to be, competent school readers by breaking the code, making meaning, and using texts appropriately. At the same time, we work on their own (critical) reading, with sociological imagination, which they might use in other contexts but rarely bring with them to school. My teacher educator colleagues and I do demonstrations of this form of critical reading in every pre-service teacher class leading up to Camp, in effect making visible to these future teachers how they, themselves, might read with sociological imagination. In this work, we try to offer our teachers a model of how reading with sociological imagination can be part of their everyday work with children.

Over the last several years, parents have enrolled their children in Summer Reading Camp because school officials or psychologists have tested their child’s reading and found it to be below the norm. For the youngest Campers, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is the test most often mentioned. Because of its relevance and ubiquity, I read DIBELS as a social thing and think aloud in front of the teachers and wannabes.

DIBELS, a set of six reading assessments designed for the early childhood classroom (www.dibels.org), reflects at least three discourses that I believe are problematic: those of experimental science, business, and government. Each test takes one minute, yielding scores to be compared to norms of capacity and development. The purpose, content, and format for DIBELS are built upon the evidence-based conclusions of the National Reading Panel (2000; also, Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998) and are deemed valid and reliable based on their correlations with other established tests. In these ways, DIBELS performs the discourse of experimental science—its language, logic, appearance, and values—constructing reading abilities and disabilities in its wake.

At the same time, DIBELS is a product that competes in a market created when a need for regular monitoring of these skills became generally accepted within the reading field. Although the basic materials of DIBELS can be downloaded from a website, and students’ scores can be processed and packaged into
reports for $1 per student, the tests are also available commercially in several forms along with test preparation materials and technical and human support as well. These products and services are advertised as being grounded in science. DIBELS incorporates the discourse of business, working for a market share, aiming to maximize profits, and serving to complicate how the profession thinks about reading ability and disability.

The market for the regular measurement of early reading was officially sanctioned when the Bush Administration implemented its Reading First Initiative of the No Child Left Behind education law of 2002. In order to ensure that all students would test ‘proficient in reading’ by 2014, the Department of Education connected federal funding to state and school compliance with testing systems that could track schools’ progress toward that goal. With the discourses of science and business presumed in modern policy making, federal officials searched for a valid and reliable technology to standardize the practices and outcomes of reading education across the country. According to a US Department of Education Inspector General’s Report (September, 2006), Reading First officials pressured states and school districts to adopt DIBELS as part of that appropriate technology in order to comply with federal policy and qualify for funding. In these ways, DIBELS projects a government discourse, framing the use of its tests as lawful behavior and a commitment to equality.

In the context of these three discourses, DIBELS replaces teachers’ local knowledge and practices with the universal values, language, and rules of science, business, and government. For example, teachers’ familiarity with students’ interests in texts or children’s questions around meanings are discounted in favor of students’ speed and accuracy when decoding sound and print. School traditions and teacher decisions give way to technologies that direct students’ attention to the code in printed texts. These discourses are sometimes contradictory, as they provide new possibilities for the participants as well as limit others. DIBELS enables administrators, teachers, parents, and students to be more effective, more efficient, and more accountable during ‘scientifically based’ reading instruction.

However, the power surrounding DIBELS also defines participants by the same terms. Depending on the outcome of DIBELS measurements, the participant becomes an able or disabled administrator, teacher, parent, or reader according to the six measures within the DIBELS battery, and their subsequent actions are disciplined by the meanings assigned and performed through the authority of these discourses. All other relations with text become less relevant and less rational. To the extent that participants internalize these discourses, the power of DIBELS becomes invisible and natural, and local administrators make policies, teachers label students, parents worry about their children, and readers are made or unmade accordingly. And even though we don’t use DIBELS, these discourses come ‘knocking on the door’ of Summer Reading Camp with calls from anxious parents, who have been warned by concerned teachers, who work in schools that
must prove that they have a technology to produce proficient readers within a specified time limit.

The discourses are already inside the door at Camp through my education as a professor of education and within the competent, schooled histories of the teachers and wannabes who work there. To varying degrees, we have internalized the discourses of science, business, and government at school and within reading instruction in particular. To many, the power of DIBELS seems a natural representation of early reading, good instruction, and equal opportunity. Our reading of DIBELS is met with a series of silent agreements. Of course, the path to reading is through perceptual skills of individual letters and their combinations; of course, companies will supply the tools to measure and build these skills; and of course, the federal government will make sure these are available to all. More generally, of course, science should decide, the market should supply, and the government should manage reading instruction.

That so many of us recite these ‘of courses’ is a testament to institutions’ effectiveness in teaching us to be socially competent—to read the world through established social norms of science, the market and government without asking too many questions. We believe, or at least act as if we believe, that this arrangement is how we became successful readers, and it sets a template for all others. Accordingly, DIBELS is simply a textual representation of the truth and utility of these values that set the norms, and it provides appropriate (natural?) guidelines to determine what students and teachers of reading should know, who they should be, and what they should value. Therefore, the earliest application of DIBELS should identify a valid and reliable hierarchy of learning and teaching among students and teachers, which should then lead to the most effective and efficient instruction for and from each and all.

Diane, Mark, Victoria, Ryan, and J. P. contradict this mindset. Their performances on DIBELS and other formal tests suggest that they are behind in their learning to read. After that diagnosis, the prescription isolates their attention on letters and sounds to build their speed and accuracy in connecting them. While they might receive this instruction in groups, their learning is to be individually charted as personal progress on these two variables. Once she or he catches up to the norm, each will be ready to think about what the print might mean. After all, DIBELS advertises that it measures pre- and early reading skills. According to DIBELS, then, the graduates should not have been ready to design a museum on the Amazon rainforest because they couldn’t gather and evaluate information independently (as if museum designers, builders, and docents work alone). Yet in an environment that actively seeks to disrupt the power of the discourses speaking through DIBELS and other texts like it, their discussion and the work around it show them to be ready, willing, and able to gather the information, evaluate it, and use it to construct an exhibit together. This environment influenced their understanding of the utility of learning to read and reading as well as their thoughts about themselves as readers.
And it’s not just a personal issue, where DIBELS has positioned a few individuals as ‘at risk’ of not learning to read, and therefore ‘in need’ of focused work on decoding skills alone. Rather, DIBELS tends to sort students by race, first language, cognitive ability, and social class, affixing the label of ‘at risk’ to a higher percentage of minorities, English language learners, special education students, and the poor and low-income students (Goodman, 2006). Within the pressures of NCLB (and now the Common Core) to make all students proficient by a deadline, schools provide code-based instruction more often for these groups than for students judged to be the norm (Afflerbach, 2012), sending the message to teachers, parents, and students that speed and accuracy are what counts as reading (Van Kraayenoord, 2010).

By reading DIBELS with sociological imagination, I demonstrate that it frames reading instruction in schools, diagnosing problems as personal failures of students and teachers. Its standard application appears to provide equal opportunity to learn to read only because it hides the systemic social consequences of unequal treatment of social groups behind its claims of scientific, market, and government authority. Whether or not teachers, wannabes, or I describe these consequences as a main danger in reading education depends on how deeply we believe the discourses behind DIBELS. Some argue during discussions that DIBELS is just a poor iteration of science that became popular only because it was marketed through government sponsorship. With better science, they contend, another test with a different instructional trajectory will close the achievement gap. Perhaps, but others have begun to question the science of a single normal curve against which all should be compared and positioned during the teaching of reading; to wonder about business’ role in growth of testing and its consequences; and to examine the government’s commitment to equitable education for all. I share these doubts and that’s why Summer Reading Camp does not use formal tests, form ability groups, or purchase curriculum.

Rather, we rely on the developing the abilities of our teachers and wannabes to produce curricula around the collaborative construction of museum exhibits; to convey the expectation that each Camper can successfully contribute to this construction; and to provide a supportive environment for Campers to use what they know and apprenticeships to learn about what they don’t know about reading to gather information for the exhibit. In order to bring demonstrations of reading with sociological imagination from many adults, we ask teachers and wannabes to practice individually on texts from their everyday lives during the semesters before they work at Camp. We hope that this sort of reading will become a habit.

**Reading Wide Awake**

To demonstrate reading with social competence or sociological imagination effectively takes an awareness of the practices at a conscious level and a willingness to talk about what you’re thinking while you’re engaging in the practices. Many
Developing Critical Consciousness

185

Teachers and wannabes voice discomfort in the unfamiliarity of talking about their reading while it happens. So we practice in several courses in our programs leading up to Camp. Teachers and wannabes pick a topic, think about its representation, frames, and pedagogy, and then come to class ready to demonstrate and talk about the connections they made. I’ll share two examples.

The first example. Penn State students wear apparel affirming their affiliation with the university. This apparel (hats, shirts, pants, backpacks, scarves, shoes, and there is more) is sanctioned by and registered with the University in order to monitor the ways in which the University’s imprint is used (and to secure profit from all sales as well, I’m sure). Although the letters, symbols, even colors differ on this apparel, students understand the apparel to be a text that functions to represent the university and to associate the person who wears it with the university and what Penn State stands for. “When I wear Penn State sweats, it means I am a Penn State student. When I see others with Penn State apparel, I think ‘We are Penn State.’” The apparel symbolizes Penn State’s official values (academic excellence, scientific research, strong social and business networks, and mission to the state, nation, and world) and some less official ones as well (sports, the dance marathon, and parties—we are always in the top five party schools). Penn State apparel positions students, aligning them with some or all of the values. Many are proud to accept this position. This is reading the apparel with social competence to fit in on and about campus.

When students read the apparel with sociological imagination, however, some of the values come into question. “When I read the back of the label, I learned some sad news.” They find that virtually all of it is made through a complicated system of subcontractors, who “pay workers poorly,” “work them long hours,” and “provide few benefits.” Some students criticize these ‘sweatshop’ conditions, but other students report that university officials maintain that Penn State apparel is made according to industry standards monitored by an industry sponsored organization. However, descriptions of the working conditions that students read about and observe on the internet disturb most of them and they acknowledge that “it changes my relationship with Penn State.” When they wear the apparel they still think, “We are Penn State” [a declaration of pride and solidarity with the institution], but they also worry, “We condone appalling labor practices abroad” [a statement of solidarity with workers, who seem to be systematically exploited by college apparel manufacturers—Penn State included].

Many teachers and wannabes choose to read apparel when we practice during courses. Although they all uncover the same ideology behind the representation, pedagogy, and frame, they make a variety of ethico-political decisions about the new information. A few have joined the local affiliate of United Students Against Sweatshops; some say they’ll pause to reflect on how their purchases affect others locally and around the world; others hold conversations with their friends about this new information; others wear the apparel inside out; and a few admit, “I’m sorry that I learned anything about these connections.”
One more example. Most wannabes work as well as attend school. That work is typically part-time with an hourly wage scale. “Employers must be flexible in order to accommodate my schedule of courses (and activities).” Businesses use the term, ‘flexible,’ in order to attract new hires. Employers imply, and sometimes state, “Flexibility is for the employees’ benefit and a hardship for the employer.” For some wannabes, the work earns ‘mad money’ meant for obtaining desires and entertainment. For many, however, employment is required “in order to afford school” and/or “to cover living expenses.” All are practiced at reading their employment with social competence, describing and performing the processes of application, disposition, duties, and pay—or they don’t last long at the job. Their part-time flexible work takes several forms, such as child or elder care, office work, retail sales, and waitressing.

Although wannabes’ descriptions of their experiences vary, upon reflection about their schedules, many observe that flexibility is more for the employer’s benefit than it is for them. Despite being able to block out certain hours for classes, workers find that they have little control over or regularity in their work schedules. Some weeks, they work “several days for only a few hours each day,” and during other weeks, “I work an 8 or 10 hour shift, but only one day that week.” Few find that they can plan on “a regular schedule or pay” and “schedules are posted online on Sunday for that week.” Restaurant and retail workers talk about having to be on call to fill in with short shifts during peak demand. All wannabes recognized that their part-time employment displaced full-time workers who required “fixed wages as well as benefits.” “We are the ones who have to be flexible.” “Our ‘flexibility’ keeps their costs low!”

No one quits her job because of these readings, but the discussions are rich around reading their work schedules with sociological imagination. All classmates have at least some experience with such work. There are different levels of investment in the issue, and only a few are willing to cite poor employment conditions as a main danger. Most comment, “I’m going to teach, but I have friends from high school stuck in those jobs.” Their implication is that teachers will always enjoy salaries, fixed schedules, and benefits. It only takes a few newspaper articles about the current ‘crisis’ in public schools, the blame thrust upon unions, and the calls for longer school days and high tech reforms for these wannabes to take another look at ‘flexibility at work’ as both a personal problem and social issue.

**Teachers Working With Students**

An interest in critical pedagogy and literacy with young children begins with two assumptions—kids can and do think and theorize, and they must have models for being critical. I began with a discussion of the graduates’ dialogue to show that even young children can engage their world critically on several levels at once. They did so, not because they had been taught a (the) process of critical literacy,
but because they had observed people who they admired engage in those practices for desired practical outcomes. It could be that the parents of Diane, Mark, Victoria, Ryan, and J. P. engage in reading with sociological imagination around the kitchen table and when watching television, and the graduates learned to be critical at home. But even if this were true, Camp teachers would need to understand young children’s background knowledge and potential for reading like this and to establish the conditions in which the graduates could practice critical thinking at school. Of course, it is crucial that teachers also reflect on their reading both with social competence and with sociological imagination. With the teachers’ help, Camp tries to establish those conditions for Campers, enabling both groups to engage “a hyper and pessimistic activism” which demonstrates that:

- all things are social;
- every social thing appears to us as text;
- all texts can be read with social competence; and
- with sociological imagination.

And this hyped-up, wide-awake consciousness entails these critical behaviors:

- **understanding** that someone produced those texts by making decisions about their composition with the intent to teach readers what we should know, who we should be, and what we should value;
- **recognizing** that these decisions are not personal, but are influenced by social discourses that are not often named explicitly in the text;
- **identifying** the ways in which the discourses position the reader in terms of her relationships with others; and
- **deciding** whether or not to accept the position offered to us on a daily basis.

For me, current reading instruction is not bad, but it’s dangerous for children and youth who do not fit easily under the ascribed normal curve. The main danger for me is that our students are systematically excluded from observing and practicing the full range of reading’s potential in a democracy (Shannon, 2007). The consequences of this danger are likely to be personal and social. The constraints of a non-critical curricular experience will enable us to fit in at school and society, but it will not encourage us to participate fully in our democracy by making sense of why things are the way they are and imagining how they could be different and more inclusive. My local response is to work with others to keep the Summer Reading Camp going and to demonstrate for teachers and wannabes what reading wide awake can do for them and community. My agency beyond the local is to write chapters like this one in which I try to position you as someone who recognizes this danger and acts to develop new ways for more children to discover all that reading (and writing) can do for them and others.
Pat’s chapter is a reflection on critical consciousness and how teachers might think about ‘thinking with their eyes wide open’ as teachers and citizens. The explicit aim here is not description of his teaching with the Camp students. However, much can be inferred regarding the museum project and the kinds of CCS that could be addressed in this kind of unit of study. I use the second-grade ELA standards.

Student Learning Activities: designed a ‘museum’ exhibit on rainforests, which entailed their reading related texts (reading and being read to); wrote about their reading including much discussion and negotiation among the students regarding the needs of the audiences for their museum; listed various flora and fauna in rainforests; checked their facts to insure accuracy; and designed the information in a way that would address various perspectives on rainforest (logging needs; sustainability needs; etc.)

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.2 Write informative/explanatory texts in which they introduce a topic, use facts and definitions to develop points, and provide a concluding statement or section.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.5 With guidance and support from adults and peers, focus on a topic and strengthen writing as needed by revising and editing.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.6 With guidance and support from adults, use a variety of digital tools to produce and publish writing, including in collaboration with peers.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.7 Participate in shared research and writing projects (e.g., read a number of books on a single topic to produce a report; record science observations).

COMMENTARY

Upon reading Pat’s observations of the these young children’s thinking and negotiation of ideas, I am amazed at how the CCS for second grade seems a bit simplistic in comparison to the nuance and complexity of these children’s work on the museum project.

Pat’s work reminds me that young children can think deeply, especially those children who’ve been labeled as ‘strugglers,’ or remediants. One implication of this idea is that we educators are ethically compelled to engage students in authentic experience and related texts that are conceptually complex and contain tensions, contradictions, or controversy inside that
complexity. Certainly, as the chapter also reminds us, it is imperative that teachers (wannabes and veterans, alike) reflect on their own critical consciousness, since as Dale Weiss argues in the next chapter, we teach who we are. If we aim to teach our students to challenge and critique text and then take actions in response to this analysis, well … we need first to practice and learn these metacognitive behaviors ourselves, as ‘wannabe’ citizens in a democracy.

References


Dale Weiss is a teacher with critical consciousness and a history of activism as a community organizer. But even with all her political experience, she has grappled and, sometimes, gotten into problems with her colleagues or administration by teaching controversial topics. As you read this chapter and think of the chapters in the preceding sections, I invite you to consider your own tolerance for teaching controversial topics. How do you use your passions and concerns about the world to shape what and how you teach? And how do ‘we teach who we are’ without subverting students’ own interests or, worse, without simply imposing our worldview on these young and impressionable learners?

My political activism took rise when I was in my twenties through anti-war work, feminism, coming out as a lesbian, becoming an anti-racist ally, and living collectively with six other people intent on changing the world through nonviolent action. The beliefs that developed within me at that time became cornerstones of what I still believe today.

My own beliefs—stemming from years of political activism—are deeply embedded in who I am and how I craft lessons for my students, as well as the perspective from which my curriculum takes root. I teach from an antibias perspective, meaning that lessons and perspectives of justice are woven throughout the school day—at times in lessons I’ve prepared, though many times through what comes up in students’ interactions with one another, and students’ reactions with what they are learning. I strongly believe that we teach who we are. For me this means providing my students with a political lens through which to gain critical
thinking skills to both understand and question the world around them, and when met with an injustice, to know that there is always something they can do to make our world a better place. When I began my teaching career in my mid-thirties with a classroom full of first-graders, I saw teaching as analogous to doing political work with children.

My journey of teaching from an antibias perspective has been rich with discovery, risks, lessons, and mistakes—all of which will be explored in this chapter. First, I take a look at hard lessons learned during my first year of teaching. Then I address tackling budget cuts and their effect on our schools, and the conservative backlash that followed. And finally, I explore teaching young children about local and national tragedies. For each of these experiences, I will share my insights on the political challenges of teaching for social justice.

**December Holidays**

My teaching career began on the picket line in a small town north of Seattle. For 30 days, I walked the picket line with my new colleagues and on a personal level, felt we’d really bonded. Most of the teachers who worked at my school had been born and raised in that small town, and they showed extraordinary kindness to me during the strike. I naïvely assumed my colleagues—with whom I experienced union solidarity on the picket line—shared a progressive world view on other issues as well. I could not have been more wrong.

Before Thanksgiving, two sixth-grade girls approached me to ask if my first-graders could make ornaments for the Christmas tree in the library. I replied that my students were learning about four different winter celebrations: Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, Christmas in Mexico, and Winter Solstice, and were making a book about each celebration. I suggested we could instead put our book in the library for others to read. However, the sixth-grade girls’ interests were only in my students contributing Christmas tree decorations, something I did not agree to do.

I spoke with my principal, Oscar, and emphasized that I thought public areas in the school should reflect as much diversity as possible. Oscar was very supportive but he cautioned me that there might be negative reactions from some of my colleagues. At a staff meeting the next day, I shared my concern about the public Christmas displays and also mentioned the other four December celebrations we were studying in my classroom. While mostly silence followed, two teachers did thank me for sharing my ideas about the December holidays.

The following day resulted in a cascade of negative reactions by my colleagues. The librarian felt I was blaming him for the Christmas tree being in the library. Another teacher—with bold movements—ripped the “Merry Christmas” banner off her wall, saying to a colleague, “We used to be able to do anything we wanted to at Christmas time, but apparently not anymore.” Another teacher chimed in, “We’re used to doing the same things every year. When December rolls around, we always take out our December boxes and put on the walls whatever is in those
boxes. And we really don’t think about it. We prefer it that way.” In the days that followed, Christmas decorations were removed from the walls. The library was almost barren. And in the spot where the library Christmas tree once stood, was placed a single book on Hanukkah. Some veteran teachers reminded me that they’d taught 20+ years—in comparison to my two-and-a-half months—and felt no need to defend their curriculum to me. One teacher reminded me “to check things out before jumping to conclusions about the way things are done at our school.”

I thought a lot about what I thought were my skills as a listener and I wondered if I was acting too aggressively, without sensitivity to the school’s holiday traditions. While I viewed myself as a collaborator and team player, I was now perceived by others as a newcomer barging in, but somehow barging in too late. Daily, my relations with colleagues continued to get uglier. One teacher said at a staff meeting, “You know, several of the staff of German background are angry that the Christmas tree in the library was removed and in its place there’s a book on Hanukkah.” I knew his comment was a direct slam on the fact that I am Jewish. Honestly, his comment really hurt. It evoked in me the unnerving memory of the Nazis’ hatred of the Jews.

My principal continued to offer me a lot support, and in the days that followed, a few staff members offered their support as well. I had popped open a Pandora’s box. My motivation was not to change others but, rather, to have more diversity represented in the library and other non-classroom spaces in the school. My honest and heartfelt initiative to bring more diversity to the school resulted in a lot of staff conflict, and it led to a rift between my colleagues and me that lasted the remainder of the year. It was a long year, that first year of teaching. I tried my best to remain cordial with my colleagues, something that was often difficult—yet important—to do.

**Lessons Learned**

I learned an incredible amount from what I have come to refer to as the ‘December Incident,’ and these lessons helped to shape my teaching in the years to come. I realized I had misunderstood my colleagues regarding their ideas about diversifying the school’s December celebrations. I also gravely underestimated what it meant to be a new teacher in a school where other teachers had taught there for many years and had also student-taught and attended elementary school there as well. I was on ‘their territory’ and had not realized it.

I now understand that for my colleagues, the celebration of Christmas represented much more than merely honoring a holiday that falls in December. It represented an entire belief system and something they valued and wanted to pass on to their students.

If I could, I would definitely do things differently if I could turn back the wheels of time. I would sit through a ‘Christmas season’ first, modeling my own
beliefs within my classroom but not pushing for change throughout the entire school.

If I could do it again, I first would assess people’s viewpoints and beliefs instead of assuming they would understand or desire to do anything differently. For example, my colleagues prided themselves on being nice. They heard my request for diversity as meaning they had not been nice to people who do not celebrate Christmas. While I believe that the teachers misinterpreted my original intent, I also think that I was partially responsible for this. I did not first acknowledge the values held by most of the staff. Perhaps if I had first acknowledged how important the Christmas season was to the vast majority of the staff, they might have been more open to adding a bit of diversity to the school’s way of celebrating December.

I also did not fully consider that people’s reactions to me might be based on the fact I was a first-year teacher. I can now see that not all veteran teachers—particularly those who have shaped the school culture and prefer things to stay a particular way—welcome new teachers with open arms.

Teaching About Budget Cuts and Facing Backlash

As a teacher in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) for the past 18 years, I have grown used to the depressing news of budget cuts arriving each February. Although cuts are always frustrating and their results burdensome, our school was usually able to ‘hang on’ reasonably well. However, one year in particular—the year Scott Walker became our governor—the state cuts were extreme, with $74 million being cut from our district alone.

Our school’s budget was down more than $150,000, and we were also slated to lose SAGE funding (class size reduction funding for grades K–3)—meaning class size would increase from 18 to 30 students. We were scheduled to lose our art teacher, library media specialist, math teacher leader, six classroom teachers, and an educational assistant.

I took a deep breath and prepared to share the bad news with my third-grade students. I began by explaining how a school district budget works. I explained that all schools in the Milwaukee School District would experience budget cuts next year. I then focused on the cuts at our school. Needless to say, the students were horrified and scared. I was scared as well!

I believe strongly in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire. I always want to give my students the tools to critically examine and understand the world around them, to feel passionate and empowered to address injustice when they see it, and, in doing so, to become shapers of their future. “Remember how I have told you that when you think something is unfair, there is always something you can do to try to turn the unfair situation into a fair one? Let’s think about what we can do to try to turn this situation around,” I challenged.
The students brainstormed a lot of ideas and we created a T-chart that compared the effects of budget cuts on our school with what they believed was important for kids and their education. The students then met in groups of four to discuss and rank their ideas for taking action to address the problem. This was followed by a class vote to narrow the list down to one favorite idea. The top choice was to write letters about how the budget cuts would affect our school. “But who should we write to?” they asked.

I described the role of a superintendent and school board in a school district. The students decided to send their letters to the school board. I told the students they would each be writing their own letter. I explained that each student should think about their own thoughts, questions, and feelings relative to budget cuts, emphasizing that whatever they thought, whatever their questions might be, and whatever their feelings were—all of this was important. I also suggested looking at the T-chart for help.

The students wrote their letters, worked with a writing partner to edit and revise their pieces, and then they generated final drafts, which were then compiled into a class book. They were excited to see the final product! The book of letters was then hand-delivered to the Office of Board Governance at our school district’s headquarters.

Several weeks later, on a Friday, I announced to the students that our school’s art teacher position was going to be eliminated. One student’s comment represented the opinion of most students. “But I thought if we wrote letters to the school board there would be more money for our school and we could keep our art teacher.” Recognizing their disappointment, I realized I had unintentionally led my students to conclude that if we simply took some action, the problem would be resolved. My students believed that their actions would bring about a miracle. My heart sank. I felt I had let my students down.

The following Monday was April 4, the 43rd anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King Jr. I read aloud the book *Martin’s Big Words* and asked the students to think about how Dr. King and others worked to change unfair things. The children were fascinated with the book. I read aloud the passage, “When the history books are written, someone will say there lived black people who had the courage to stand up for their rights” (Rappaport, 2007, p. 14). I then asked: “Do you see a connection between what Dr. King and others did, and something you have done?” The students quickly responded, “Yes! It’s like when we wrote those letters to the school board!” I answered, “Exactly. Now as I keep reading the story think about if the unfair things they worked on changed quickly or took a while.”

On the last page, it read that the protests continued for 10 years (from the Montgomery bus boycott) until lawmakers voted to end segregation. I asked the students why they thought change sometimes takes a very long time to happen. This was followed by a rich discussion about how social change can take a very long time.
Approximately a month later, an article I wrote on teaching budget cuts to my students was published in the progressive educational magazine *Rethinking Schools*. The article also appeared in the online version of the magazine (Weiss, 2011). About midday on a Friday, I received a phone call from my principal informing me that several conservative blogs had picked up my article, and it had gone viral. The conservatives organized a call-in campaign to our district headquarters, demanding my resignation for “indoctrinating young students and forcing them to write letters to elected officials.” While my principal remained very supportive of the article I’d written, she also cautioned me about the backlash that was spinning out of control. The media had contacted the school and interviewed the president of our union (a former teacher and co-founder of our school). Several radio stations got wind of the conservative online blogs and latched on like wildfire. I received hundreds of emails—the vast majority of which assaulted my character and my beliefs, as well as called for my resignation. Sprinkled amidst the hate mail were emails from friends—as well as from people whom I’d never met—sharing their own stories that were so familiar to my own. The intensity of this backlash lasted for three days, and then it suddenly wound down with the same immediacy that it originally began.

**Lessons Learned**

My lessons as a teacher activist were incredibly profound. Earlier in the same year, our state was the first in the nation to have collective bargaining ripped away from public workers. And from that point on, teachers, in particular, were vilified on a daily basis. The state became incredibly divided, with one side being public workers and those who support justice, while on the other side were those supporting a Tea Party ideology. I did not once consider that writing my article would in any way rile up those who detest public workers—and teachers in particular. I was naïve in not considering this. A lesson very hard learned.

The process of addressing budget cuts with my students taught me an incredible amount. As a teacher addressing these issues within my classroom, I learned that laying a social justice foundation for young students is a complex process. I learned that no matter how in-depth and thorough I think I am in explaining difficult issues to students, these issues need to be revisited many, many times. I also learned that my students are not afraid to speak up about deserving a good education, and that they expect to be heard.

**Responding to the Tragedy at the Sikh Temple**

When important news events occur, usually my first reaction is, ‘Is this news relevant and appropriate for my young students and, if yes, how can I teach about this topic in way that will make sense?’ This was the question I asked myself on
August 5, 2012, when an assailant shot and killed six members of the Sikh community at their temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin—about 20 minutes from where I live in Milwaukee.

In the following days, I read every article I could find about this tragedy. I was fixated on television newscasts, and I googled massive amounts of information about Sikhs. I couldn’t understand why someone would commit such a horrific action on this peaceful cultural group. Later that week, I attended a service at the Sikh temple when it was reopened to the public. I arrived at 8 a.m., planned to stay for an hour or two, but did not leave until well into the afternoon.

A few days later I attended a drumming circle for peace at the temple. I told a woman sitting next to me that I hoped to find someone from the Sikh community who would consider doing a presentation to my students about Sikhism. I was pleased when she offered to arrange a visit! I decided that a unit of study on Sikh people and their culture was both relevant and teachable to my students. I knew that to do this unit effectively, I would need to increase my own knowledge bank on Sikh culture as well as about the tragedy at the temple. I continued to read about Sikhism and gather resources.

I decided that the theme of the Sikh unit would be peace. The second day of school, my second graders and I gathered together in a circle. I asked the students to think about what a peaceful classroom would look and sound like, and so began my unit. What follows now is a summary of the main activities of this unit.

- Students filled out a T-chart, generating ideas of Examples of a Peaceful Classroom and the other Examples That Are Not a Peaceful Classroom and asked for ideas.
- Students responded to the prompt, I am a peacemaker because … by writing ideas on index cards and posting them around the classroom.
- I presented information to students about the Sikh religion, its India origins, and details of the shooting.
- I challenged students to become peacemakers so that “we could help our world try to prevent such horrible things from ever happening again.”
- We read the children’s book, I Belong to the Sikh Faith (Decker, 2009), a study of Sikh religious principles, including opportunities for student discussion of each principle.
- We watched the video, The Sikh Next Door (Yeager, 2009), which shows Sikh life in the US from the perspective of Sikh middle and high school students.
- We read another children’s book, The Boy with the Long Hair (Singh, 1999), an expository text about a Sikh boy who was bullied because of wearing a patka. The video was followed by a discussion that resulted in the students wanting to create a banner with the slogan, What we all have in common is that we are all different. A photo of each student in our class was also added to the banner, which hung in the front hallway of our school for the remainder of the school year.
- The students created research posters that depicted one aspect of Sikh culture or the tragedy at the Sikh temple.
The students held a bake sale to raise money for children who’d lost a parent during the tragedy at the temple.

Two members of the Sikh community did a presentation to the class. The students learned how to put on a turban, patka, and sari; listened to the tablas (drums); read a bilingual (English/Punjabi) book with our guests; sang peace songs; and presented the book they had made. The students insisted that we add photos we had taken of our visitors to the banner we’d made. One afternoon shortly after this, Gabriel, a student from another class, walked by the banner and exclaimed, “Look! One of the kids from this class looks like a genie!” A student from our class, Javonne, overheard this, and I asked him to respond to Gabriel.

Javonne explained, “It’s called a turban, Gabriel. People who wear turbans don’t cut their hair because they believe their hair is a gift from God. The turban covers their hair.” Clearly, the students became skilled at responding to stereotypes, especially at it related to Sikhs. The next day, during our community circle time, I shared this story with the class and how proud I was of Javonne for the way he handled the situation. I was careful not to portray Gabriel as having done something wrong, but rather having made a comment about something he did not understand. A student quickly responded, “But other people might say the same thing as Gabriel. We should put words by the pictures on our banner.” She was absolutely right. Without enough forethought, it had not dawned on me that others would not understand the pictures we’d placed on our banner. Inadvertently, I’d left the banner wide open to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Later that day, we added a description of the photos to the banner, adding a reminder that when meeting someone one perceives to be different, Don’t judge! Instead, be curious!

Our class visited the Sikh temple later in the fall. We talked and shared lunch with members of the community. After lunch, the children presented, with gifts to family members who had lost a loved one, our class book and money the students raised from the bake sale.

Later, we celebrated Heritage Day in our classroom, a cultural event begun by members of the Sikh community in an effort to celebrate and honor all cultural heritages. Each student brought a potluck food item from his or her ethnic background. Amardeep Kaleka, who lost his father on August 5, his wife, and their 2-year-old son joined us for this celebration.

Getting to know Amardeep became a turning point for our classroom community. Amardeep is a filmmaker from Los Angeles and was in the process of working on a documentary entitled Peacemakers. He asked to film the students in our classroom, along with interviewing me—which happened the day after school let out in June 2013. Little did I know when we embarked on our journey of learning about the tragedy at the Sikh temple, we would be in a documentary on peace directed by the son of one of those killed in that very tragedy. (At the time of writing, Peacemakers is scheduled to be released in the summer or fall of 2014.)
Lessons Learned

When I first heard about the shooting at the Sikh temple, I immediately felt shock and sadness—along with embarrassment for knowing so very little about Sikh people, their religion, and their culture. Yet amidst my own shameful ignorance was propulsion that moved me quickly into action. In most cases, I have ample time to prepare units of study before teaching these to my students. However, when a local or national tragedy occurs, we often need to gather knowledge, plan, and keep moving—all at the same time. Creating this unit for my students was one such example. Many times I thought, ‘Who am I to presume I can teach something so important, when my own knowledge is so lacking?’ Though I knew I would barely be a step ahead of students and would most likely be learning right along with them, I also realized that teaching this unit was what I felt called to do, and so I needed to take action, quickly. I was presented with a powerful lesson. I learned that despite feelings of ignorance that I experienced, taking a stand for justice far outweighed any deficits I momentarily may have felt. I learned that there are times our actions—as bold and unknown as they may seem at times—will be carried along by both our efforts as well as the goodwill of others who help us along the way. The graciousness shown to me by members of the Sikh community as I tried to pull this teaching unit together was one such meaningful example.

Through participating in the unit on Sikhs, my second graders learned that they not only can make a difference, they did make a difference. They embraced the ‘other’ with openness and curiosity, and from that place were able to learn a great deal. And although we started out to learn about another group of people, in the end we built a relationship with them.

Through creating a teaching unit around the tragedy at the Sikh temple, I was once again reminded that young children have the ability to understand sad and horrific events. I truly believe that children have deep desires to make our world a better place, and when given the opportunity to do so, will move forward with compassion and meaningful action.

Conclusion

Teaching from a social justice perspective requires a lot from us. One of the most important things I believe this means for me is remembering that I am not perfect.

Despite my bold and passionate intentions to make our world a better place, there are times I will err, and even err miserably. For me, this sometimes means needing to retreat for a bit to reflect and consider things from a different perspective. Or sometimes this means making amends or asking for forgiveness. And sometimes this means trying a different tactic. But no matter what it might
mean, what’s important is to remember to keep going, to keep trying, and to keep moving forward in this journey called working for social justice.

Teaching from a social justice perspective requires being a risk-taker. Particularly in the times in which we live—where the pendulum keeps trying to inch its way towards the conservative right—what we stand for will not always be met with open arms. In fact, people will often go out of their way to put us down or hope we fail. What has always helped me are two things. One, to remember I am not the first, nor the last, person on this road of working for social justice. As many have often said, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. Just remembering that alone always brings me strength and solace. And it reminds me what an absolute honor it is to spend my life in this kind of work, with this kind of meaning. The second thing that has always helped me is to not try to go this road alone. It is important to find others who support this way of teaching and to spend time with them sharing successes as well as challenges. It is important to network with people who’ve done this kind of work for a long time, as well as those who are just beginning. To ask for help, and to offer it as well. Reading books about freedom fighters, listening to their music, and reading their poetry often feels to me like being rocked in the arms of justice. One of my own personal social justice heroines is Holly Near. For decades her music has carried me through my own struggles and spurred me on towards the finish line I so often envision.

I have saved my favorite for last. Working for social justice requires believing in the capacity of change, and the capacity of our students—no matter how young—to be able to understand the need for change and to carry it forward. There are many who believe that children—particularly children as young as those with whom I work—should not be told about how bad the world is, nor should they be required to do anything about it. I disagree. The world these days can be a scary place in which to live and grow up. But I also wholeheartedly believe that fear can be transformative when the roots of that fear are known and understood. When children are given the critical thinking tools in which to explore an injustice deeply, and the time in which to have their questions and concerns adequately addressed as often as need be, their fears about the world and all its injustices transform into the power of knowing that there is always something they can do to try to make our world a better place. In my 23 years as a public school teacher, I never once had to convince any of my students to take action against an injustice. When given the opportunity to understand an unjust situation, children want to do something to bring about positive change. They want to come up with ideas and create solutions. And no matter how small or bold their solutions may be, what is always important is that they be given the chance and support to try because it is in trying that their fears are transformed to hope. And with that power of hope, change can and will happen.
CONNECTIONS TO THE COMMON CORE

I use the third-grade standards to show connections between the CCS and Dale’s work. In her chapter, of course, much of her writing consists of reflections on the political dimensions of her work. Still, throughout the stories, we read of her students’ engagement with academic content.

Student Learning Activities: wrote persuasive letters, including the editing and revision of these letters; read many texts (literary and informational) followed by discussion and interpretation; learned new vocabulary; and learned to ‘read’ stereotypes in everyday texts

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.2 Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.4 Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.6 Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text.

COMMENTARY

Critical literacy is more a mindset than a particular set of teaching strategies, and Dale’s work exemplifies this idea. Teachers who have critical consciousness tend to be more alert to issues, problems, incongruities, discontinuities, tensions, dilemmas, and controversies in their community and beyond. Dale knows that children have an acute sense of what is fair and not, so her practice of pointing out problems and issues to her students tends to elicit, in the students, an interest to engage in those topics. Of course, sometimes the enthusiasm of students and teacher to respond to some injustice may not be shared by skeptical parents, colleagues, administration or, worse yet, Fox News. This is why I believe that Dale’s insights about doing this kind of work carefully, incrementally, and in consultation with various stakeholders, are judicious and political.
References

The central implication of teaching critically is that teachers are critical themselves. As Dale reminds us, ‘we teach who we are.’ Certainly, the process of learning how to think critically is a lifetime project and one that never ends. To start teaching critically, it requires that you simply jump in and try out some of the ‘modest’ suggestions in the book, like examining author bias and multiple perspectives in text. I want to suggest two ideas for you to help nurture and deepen your critical consciousness:

First, get out in the world. If you live in a racially segregated community or town, like most of us do, engage with people and groups that have racial, gendered, and class/economic diversity (i.e., they are different than you!). By engaging with others who are different, we have opportunities to reflect on existing beliefs and, importantly, get challenged by others who may have, perhaps, been offended or triggered by something we said or did. If you live in a segregated community but work in a school with great diversity, take advantage of this golden opportunity by listening and learning from your students and the families about their issues, concerns, and aspirations. See if you can find your way into your students’ homes. Luis Moll’s concept, Funds of Knowledge, which recognizes that all our students, especially those who have historically have been left out of the curriculum, do engage in richly textured cultural practices in their homes and communities. These cultural practices can and should be used to shape much of our curriculum (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Second, after actual experience, reading is a second best way to expand our horizons. Read both fiction and nonfiction, about the lives of others. Learn about the experiences of our Islamic and Arab neighbors, who live in all of our communities, African-Americans, Latinos, gay and lesbian families, the struggles of the majority of Americans who have been left out of the recent economic boom on Wall Street, and people whose lives are being changed by climate change. Spend time in nature, and this might influence you to reconsider your relationship with commodities and shopping. With intention, watch documentaries that show alternative perspectives to history, politics, food, justice, and human rights. History, perhaps, is the most compelling source for those of us looking to enhance our critical competence. It is useful to read social histories, so we better understand the experience of women, the working class, immigrants, American-Indians and other people of color who have been largely erased from school history books. By reading, and I mean the kind of reading that challenges our existing beliefs, we can develop the capacity to consider multiple perspectives.
PART IV

Bringing It All Together
This page intentionally left blank
CRITICAL LITERACY AND THE COMMON CORE

Resolving Tensions and Enhancing Student Engagement

Ken Winograd

One of the premises of this book is that the CCS and critical literacy can co-exist and even support each other. While this premise is defensible and reasonable, it is important to acknowledge that the discourses of each inhabit separate and, arguably, contradictory universes. The CCS, as Au and Waxman argue in Chapter 2, represents a corporate model of education. It has been shaped by economic interests, aimed at improving students’ preparedness for the college and workplace. The CCS is a top-down set of national standards, a ‘one size fits all’ set of learning outcomes that ignores local, regional, and cultural knowledge in our vast and diverse country. The Common Core Standards, especially the English Language Arts Standards, are a set of metacognitive processes devoid of culture, critical literacy, and concern for student engagement.

Conversely, critical literacy’s central purpose is to enhance an equitable and democratic society, and to improve our student-citizens’ skill and disposition to participate effectively in their communities. Critical literacy, furthermore, aims to teach students to challenge, question, and ‘push back’ on the status quo. Of course, critical literacy does not deny the importance of a jobs and economic security. However, critical literacy and social justice education can help future citizens engage in the workplace in more thoughtful, caring and socially responsible ways.

At the end of their chapter, Au and Waxman allude to the imminent national tests, like Smarter Balanced. In the frenetic and anxious policy and regulatory climate for teachers, there is much frenzy and angst about the national tests. There appears to be agreement that the Common Core is more rigorous than previous state standards. However, the new national tests, designed to align with the CCS, appear to be similarly rigorous but at a level of complexity that many teachers and students are not yet ready for. Charlotte Danielson, a well-regarded scholar in educational assessment and a proponent of the CCS, warned,
But I do worry somewhat about the assessments—I’m concerned that we may be headed for a train wreck there. The test items I’ve seen that have been released so far are extremely challenging. If I had to take a test that was entirely comprised of items like that, I’m not sure that I would pass it—and I’ve got a bunch of degrees. So I do worry that in some schools we’ll have 80 percent or some large number of students failing. That’s what I mean by train wreck.

(Pipkin, 2013)

On paper, the CCS represent a reasonable and limited set of standards for teachers to use to help organize curriculum. Given the anxiety about the CCS-shaped national tests, however, my concern is that CCS have become hyper-extended as the goal of education. (Remember, as a corporate model for curriculum, the CCS’ vision of college is, for the most part, the preparation of students for the workplace.)

To summarize, the CCS is problematic for US teachers and public education in at least three ways:

• an over-focus on the CCS by school districts, along with related adoption of CCS-ready curricula;
• the absence of curriculum/teaching reflecting broader educational purposes, like the teaching of critical thinking, the building of caring communities, multiculturalism, and global understanding; and
• the imminent CCS-shaped national tests which, if Danielson’s predictions come true, can unfairly portray public education and teachers as, again, ‘failing’ American youth.

The Common Core and Its Challenges: Complex Text, Close Reading, and Boring Curriculum

One important criticism of the Common Core Standards (CCS) is what John Guthrie observes as an absence of literacy engagement, when “reading is driven by motivations of confidence, interest and value of reading” (Guthrie & McPeake, 2013, p. 163). In the reading community, there is considerable criticism that the CCS does not attend to the ‘motivational supports’ that would scaffold students’ engagement with difficult text and its analysis (Neuman & Gambrell, 2013). Without these ‘motivational supports,’ Guthrie and others are especially concerned since the CCS appear to be significantly more challenging than earlier iterations of (state) standards.

Hiebert (2012) observed that the CCS requires that students read texts that are significantly more difficult than ‘grade level’ texts read in the last 20 or so years. For example, “On the Lexile scale that the CCSS uses for its staircase of text complexity, the step for grades two-three ends at 790L, approximately one grade level
higher than previous recommendations” (Hiebert, 2012, p. 26). It is sobering to recall that on the 2008 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), two thirds of US fourth graders failed to reach the earlier grade-level (more modest) standard for fourth grade!

Reflecting Guthrie’s concerns, here are two challenges about student engagement and the Common Core. First, how do teachers help students find the motivation to grapple with increasingly more complex texts, when we know that they already grapple (motivationally) with less complex (and boring) school-sponsored texts? The problem of student disengagement is especially perilous since the imminent national tests will contain texts and tasks that, reflecting the CCS, will be similarly abstruse. (Incidentally, when Smarter Balanced was administered in New York last year, 60% of students failed (Hernández & Gebeloff, 2013; Rethinking Schools, 2013.).)

Second, the standards require text-dependent analysis (i.e., close reading) of text, through the examination of themes, central ideas, structure and syntax, and vocabulary. In the CCS, the opportunity for students to relate text to the personal, political, and moral dimensions has been relegated almost to the proverbial extension activity. No doubt, text-dependent analysis is important, but I wonder if having 80%–90% of the standards focus on text-dependent analysis (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012) represents a pendulum swing that is excessive.

Given the demands of excessive text-dependent analysis work in the context of increasing text complexity, it is crucial that teachers work to support student engagement and motivation to read. Guthrie and Wigfield’s (2000) synthesis of the research describes instructional processes that, together, may influence reading motivation:

1. Reading and writing activity is connected to real-world applications, issues, and problems.
2. Student have choices regarding which books are read, higher level discussion questions, how reading is organized (e.g., silently or orally), post-reading activities, setting goals, etc.
3. Texts are of interest to students.
4. Students receive high quality strategy instruction, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy as learners from text.
5. Students feel social support from teacher and peers, and classrooms that are social/collaborative (e.g., readers workshop, discussion groups, book talks).

In the next section, I suggest that critical literacy is a quintessentially high-engagement form of teaching, reflecting Guthrie and Wigfield’s conditions, with important implications for the CCS.
The Common Core and Critical Literacy: Thinking Synergistically

I think synergistically about the relationship between critical literacy and the Common Core. Synergy has been defined as the “interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects” (Google Definitions, n.d.). I will argue here that critical literacy and the CCS, if combined or used in tandem by teachers, can result in an outcome that is greater than the sum of their separate outcomes. In achieving this synergy, critical literacy can provide a powerful conceptual lens to a high-engagement curricular context for the teaching of the Common Core, for two reasons.

First, texts that reflect critical literacy activity, used for instructional purposes (and for recreational reading), are by definition interesting and relevant: texts that reflect the interests, everyday community life, and problems of students; and issue-oriented texts that describe and pose ‘real-world applications.’ It is time, again, to rethink the common practice of adopting ‘core reading programs’ with standardized anthologies full of (abbreviated) texts as the basis for instruction. There are too many problems with core reading programs to address here, but for the purposes of my argument, core reading programs appear to fail Guthrie’s criteria of a high-engagement literacy program. Instead of the standard anthology as text, teachers and students may be better served by using, instead, children’s literature, reflecting both literary and expository genres, as well as other relevant texts such as newspapers, magazines, graphic books, comics, and, of course, the internet.

Second, a metacognitive strategy that characterizes the heart of the CCSS is argument: the close reading and use of evidence from text to construct arguments. It appears that critical literacy, a form of inferential comprehension, is a reasonable pedagogic approach to teach argument. Critical literacy teaches that texts, never neutral, are social constructions whose goal is shaping the emotions, beliefs, or behavior of the reader. The idea that all (or most) texts are contingent, author-constructed, and inherently subject to criticism can have a profound positive effect on students’ motivation to read, analyze, discuss, and debate. When we open spaces in classrooms for students to question and challenge text, regular opportunities for argument can provide a motivational context for students to more persistently focus and grapple with difficult text.

Critical literacy, both text-dependent and text-independent analysis, requires the social construction of meaning and all the negotiative give-and-take that happens among students and teacher when text meaning is ambiguous and, better yet, edgy and controversial. This kind of reading is motivating, enjoyable, and purposeful work for students. Kate Lyman in Chapter 12 wrote,

I saw some of the best writing of the year in students’ poems and persuasive essays. Not only were they able to write, but they were also enthusiastic about spending extra time on the computer to produce finished pieces. The
enthusiasm, I felt, came from the conviction that the writing was for an important purpose (emphasis added). The students were engaged in an effort to help stem injustice. It could be argued that their impact will be small, but I believe they won’t forget the lessons learned about taking action.

(p. 167)

Mindful of Kate’s students in the child labor unit, I would be remiss if I didn’t remind readers that in every description of critical literacy in this book, the authors described students as having fun, enthusiastic, and engaged with purpose. Every chapter! I also noted a similar high level of student engagement in other articles on critical literacy that I did not use for this book.

Still, I am cautious about promoting any approach as a panacea that will work for all students all the time (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). But I am confident in asserting that critical literacy has the potential to work for most students most of the time and, by work, I mean student engagement and learning is nurtured and enhanced. And I make this assertion based on generations of stories in the educational literature, from Evelyn and John Dewey, William Ayers, Vivian Vasquez, the ethnic studies program in Tucson, Arizona, and 27 years of Rethinking Schools: that purposeful and goal-directed activity, experiential, sometimes controversial, grounded in real community and world problems and issues, with the support and critique of interested others … these conditions can powerfully enhance student engagement.

In 1984, John Goodlad (2004) famously described the emotional tone of schools as “neither harsh and punitive or warm and joyful; it might be described most accurately as flat” (p. 108). Unfortunately, the emotional landscape of schools does not appear too much different today, more than 30 years later. In the onerous (to most teachers) or hopeful (to some teachers) context of the Common Core, nurturing student interest and engagement is a prerequisite to their attention to teachers’ valiant efforts to teach the standards. The evidence suggests that provocative texts, critical literacy, and social activism can engender this interest and engagement.

The Common Core Standards train has left the station. While the CCS most likely will morph into another form in the next few years, the challenge now for teachers is to act proactively to survive and even thrive in the current market-based regulatory and political context. I imagine the task for teachers is, first, to join with colleagues in the political work of working to revise the standards and resist the testing regime; and second, collaborate with colleagues in the development of high-engagement curriculum grounded in students’ lives. Critical literacy is one such promising high-engagement curricular approach.

References


SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES:  
AN ANNOTATED SHORT LIST

Texts on Teaching Critical Literacy, With a Focus on Social Issues:

A comprehensive book on teaching critical literacy, for teachers K–5. This volume contains a theoretical framework for critical literacy, thoughtful reflections by and vignettes of teachers using critical literacy in the classroom, and many resources, including a great annotated bibliography of issue-oriented children’s literature.

An introductory book on critical literacy for the early childhood teacher with many examples of teaching students to critique children’s literature for bias.

Texts on Teaching Critical Literacy, With a Focus on Students as Producers of Critical Texts:

A huge collection of readings on addressing social justice with preschoolers to around third grade.

4. RethinkingSchools.org  
Rethinking Schools is arguably the premier resource for K–12 social
justice teachers. The magazine’s writing is clear and accessible to teachers, and its advocacy for social and environmental justice is passionate.

   Mary Cowhey describes her social justice teaching with first and second graders, stories from her class over a two-year period. Mary is a former community organizer, and her work to integrate her ‘Peace Class’ with the local community is inspirational. Mary teaches students to get involved and make the world a better place, and she does this with great respect for the intellectual curiosity of young children.

**Texts on Using Everyday Texts as the Focus of Critical Analysis, Including New Media:**

   Vivian Vasquez’ book focuses on the use of everyday texts as the basis for critical analysis (similar to what she describes in Chapter 4 of this book). Vivian is an icon in the work of critical literacy and young children. Her scholarship in this area is prolific, and this is one of her early books.

   This book provides concise and accessible descriptions of integrating technology, media, critical literacy and the content areas, for students 4–8 years old. This is an original ground-breaking book on the uses of technology and critical literacy.

**Texts That Have Relevance to the Political Dimensions of What to Teach and How, Including the Common Core:**

   This article makes a compelling case that there is no ‘silver bullet’ in the teaching of reading. Research since the first-grade studies in the 1960s have concluded that it is the teacher who matters in the reading achievement of students. This is a useful text for teachers to share with administrators the next time they suggest or require the implementation of any reading program with fidelity.

This is a marvelous collection of readings by leaders in the reading research community on the limitations and possibilities of the Common Core. The book is full of ideas for the teaching of reading while making connections to the Core.


A quick read, a critique of the standards movement written 14 years ago but still very relevant. One of Ohanion’s big ideas is that there is no evidence that standards improves student learning. She was right then and she is right now.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Wayne Au, a former public high school teacher, is an associate professor in the Education Program at the University of Washington, Bothell, and he is a long-time editor for the social justice teaching magazine and publishing house, Rethinking Schools. Wayne writes extensively about critical education policy, curriculum studies, and teaching for social justice. He is author of Unequal by Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor of Pencils Down: Rethinking High-Stakes Testing and Accountability in Public Schools (Rethinking Schools, 2012), among other books, chapters, and articles.

SueAnn Bottoms is an assistant professor in the College of Education at Oregon State University. Her research focus examines the teaching of science by pre-service elementary teachers. She is especially interested in how pre-service teachers bring an asset-perspective to inform both their developing practice as teachers of science and their relationships with the children and families in their school communities. Titles of some recent scholarship include Families Involved in Education: Sociocultural Teaching and STEM and Addressing the Complexity of Teaching: Engaging Prospective Elementary Teachers in Integrating Science, Social Justice, and Language Learning. She is currently the President of the Oregon Association for Teacher Educators.

Simon Boxley is on the Faculty of Education, Health, and Social Care at the University of Winchester, UK. His main areas of expertise include the philosophy of education, particularly Marxist, eco-socialist and eco-sophical perspectives. Simon is interested in education policy and practice, particularly relating to workforce, public–private nexus, primary and early years education in England. Importantly, he has engaged in environmental education and sustainable development, particularly in England.
Kathryn McIntosh Ciechanowski is an associate professor of ESOL/bilingual and literacy education at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon. She was the 2007 recipient of the First Place Outstanding Dissertation Award from the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE). Kathryn has published in journals such as *Journal of Literacy Research, Reading Research Quarterly, Reading Teacher, Oregon TESOL,* and *Washington TESOL.* Her current research focuses on content area language and literacy for English language learners, social justice, bilingual student sociocultural resources in science and social studies, and teacher education at the intersections of STEM and cultural/linguistic diversity.

Helen Clarke is a senior lecturer at the University of Winchester, UK, where she teaches on undergraduate and postgraduate Initial Teacher Education programs. She has particular expertise in learning and teaching science in the early years and primary phases. Committed to celebrating the energy and enthusiasm that children, students and teachers bring to their learning, she has researched children’s early exploration and enquiry, Rights Respecting Education, sustainability, environmental education, and teacher development, both in the UK and overseas. She is currently working, with colleagues, on the notion of ‘nature-naivety’ as a means to conceptualize relationships with the natural world.

Barbara Comber is a research professor in the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. She is particularly interested in literacy education and social justice. She has conducted longitudinal ethnographic studies and collaborative action research with teachers working in high poverty and culturally diverse communities. Her research examines the kinds of teaching that make a difference to young people’s learning trajectories. Her current work explores ethical educational leadership, the affordances of place-conscious pedagogies for developing critical and creative literacies. She has also undertaken an institutional ethnography focusing on mandated literacy assessment and the reorganization of teachers’ work. Barbara has co-edited a number of books including the *International Handbook of Research in Children’s Literacy, Learning and Culture* (Hall, Cremin, Comber, & Moll, 2013), *Literacies in Place: Teaching Environmental Communications* (Comber, Nixon, & Reid, 2007) and *Turn-Around Pedagogies: Literacy Interventions for At-Risk Students* (Comber & Kamler, 2005).

Victoria Dewey, after having worked in retail and business, undertook an Education Studies degree at the University of Winchester. She is now a newly qualified teacher working in Hampshire, UK and is continuing to develop her interest in environmental education.

Karen Dooley is an associate professor in the School of Curriculum, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. She lectures in primary English Curriculum and research methods. Her research interests include pedagogies for
print and digital literacies in high poverty, high diversity settings. She is particularly interested in subject English education for students who speak English as an additional language or dialect.

**Beryl Exley** is an experienced classroom teacher who is now an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, where she teaches in undergraduate and postgraduate programs and researches in English Curriculum and literacy teaching and learning. Beryl draws on sociocultural approaches to literacy teaching and learning and has a special interest in applied linguistics across the curriculum in the school context. She has been a chief investigator on a large Australian Research Council Linkage Grant exploring the affordances of digital literacies for promoting print-based learning outcomes (2009–2013). She recently co-authored *Playing With Grammar in the Early Years* with Lisa Kervin in 2013 and has been an active member of the National Executive of the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association since 2005. Her research publications are available at [http://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Exley,_Beryl.html](http://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Exley,_Beryl.html).

**Jerome (Jerry) C. Harste** is emeritus professor of literacy, culture, and language education at Indiana University, Bloomington, where he was the first member of that faculty to hold the Martha Lea & Bill Armstrong Chair in Teacher Education. He has co-authored a number of books including *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* (1984), *Creating Classrooms for Authors* (1988), *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers* (1996), *Creating Critical Classrooms: K–8 Reading and Writing with an Edge* (2008), and *Teaching Children’s Literature: It’s Critical!* (2013).

**J. Amos Hatch** is professor of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee. His teaching is focused on preparing prospective teachers to work in urban settings, helping practicing professionals to be more effective in their work, and guiding the development of advanced graduate students. He has published widely in the areas of children’s social development, early childhood theories and practices, teacher education, and qualitative methods. He has written or edited seven books, and is currently completing a book on resisting externally imposed education reform efforts (Rowman and Littlefield, late 2014). He has served as executive co-editor of the *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* and *Qualitative Studies in Education*. He has also served in leadership capacities with a number of organizations, including a four-year term on the governing board of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

**Kimberly R. Huber** is a first-grade teacher at North Salem Elementary School in the North West Hendricks School Corporation in North Salem, Indiana. She is currently examining the relationships between the use of critical literacy in her rural classroom, the evolving social dynamics that occur simultaneously with
these texts, and the role of critical literacy within the Common Core framework. She completed her master’s degree at IUPUI and focused her thesis on using critical literacy in her first-grade classroom.

Christine (Chris) H. Leland is professor of literacy, culture, and language education at the Indiana University School of Education at Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis (IUPUI). She teaches graduate and undergraduate literacy courses and works with masters’ and doctoral students. Her research focuses on urban schools and the role that critical literacy and inquiry can play in supporting the development of all children as empowered learners. She is a co-author of Creating Critical Classrooms: K–8 Reading and Writing with an Edge (2008) and Teaching Children’s Literature: It’s Critical! (2013).

Kate Lyman teaches third grade at Hawthorne Elementary School in Madison, Wisconsin. For over 35 years she has taught students with diverse backgrounds, including many English language learners. She develops and implements culturally relevant curriculum, with a social justice component. Her current challenge is to craft school curricular activity to be motivating and meaningful in an age of increased testing, unfeasible standards, and scripted, mandatory teaching programs.

Wendy B. Meller was a literacy curriculum coach at Hardy Williams Academy Charter School in Philadelphia when she co-authored the article, “Using Read-Alouds with Critical Literacy Literature in K–3 Classrooms.”

Jennifer O’Brien has been retired from teaching, researching, and writing for about 15 years. Having started as a high school English teacher and teacher-librarian, she moved into primary teaching and literacy education. A graduate diploma in Language and Literacy education introduced her to post-structural thought and critical literacy. These, combined with the 1970s feminism of her early twenties helped her develop a desire to help young students take a critical view of their texts. Her work focused particularly on gendered portrayals of women and girls, not only in classroom texts but in the material out in the world, especially the ‘junk mail’ to be found in most letter boxes.

Danielle Richardson is an elementary school teacher in the Knox County (TN) Public Schools. She earned a master’s degree in education with a focus in the area of urban multicultural studies at the University of Tennessee and a bachelor’s degree in healthcare administration at East Tennessee State University. She is currently in her seventh year of teaching: five years in an inner city school and two in a suburban school. She has mentored college students who are currently in an education program and also serves on her school’s Lead Teacher Evaluation Team.
Carol Lloyd Rozansky is a professor and chair of the Education Department at Columbia College Chicago. Prior to that, she was a professor at University of Nebraska at Omaha, where she spent over 20 years developing and teaching literacy education, urban education, and critical pedagogy courses. One of six founding members of Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed (PTO), she served as an officer for 14 years. Carol’s work demonstrates her concern and commitment to equitable educational opportunities for all children and young people. Her work in urban education and critical pedagogy has been incorporated into her work with the African American Achievement Council in Omaha, her most recent research and publications, her education of future teachers, and her leadership in PTO. She has also collaborated with science and mathematics colleagues to develop STEM curricula for underserved students.

Caroline (Carrie) Thorpe Santos was a third-grade teacher in the Omaha (Nebraska) Public Schools for 11 years. Currently, she is an elementary reading specialist. She worked with Carol Lloyd Rozansky to develop, conduct, and present the research described in their chapter.

Patrick Shannon is a professor of education at Penn State University. He is the professor in charge of the reading specialist program and the integrated undergraduate/graduate program for special education and curriculum and instruction. His most recent books are Reading Wide Awake (Teacher College, 2011), Closer Readings of the Common Core (Heinemann, 2013), and Reading Poverty in America (Routledge, 2014).

Pat Thomson is a professor in the School of Education, the University of Nottingham, and Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies (Arts and Social Sciences). Her research is primarily focused on the arts and creativity in school and community change (see for example www.signaturepedagogies.org.uk). She is currently doing pedagogical research with school, museum, and gallery partners (see cparchive.wordpress.com; valueliveart.wordpress.com and www.getwet.org.uk). She also teaches and writes about academic writing and doctoral education. Her most recent books are co-written with Barbara Kamler: a second edition of Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision (Routledge, 2014) and Writing for Publication: Strategies for Getting Published (Routledge, 2013). She blogs about academic writing and research education on patthomson.wordpress.com and can be found on Twitter @ThomsonPat.

Vivian Vasquez is a professor of education at American University. Prior to working in academia, she taught pre-school and public school for 14 years. She is an Amazon Best Selling Author for three of her nine books. Her honors include winning the James N. Britton Award and the AERA Division B Outstanding Book of the Year Award for Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children.

Barbara Waxman has pursued her passions for improving teaching and learning as a researcher, teacher, and consultant. She has designed and taught in innovative teacher certification and masters of education programs and consulted with K–12 teachers and administrators. For 12 years, she promoted innovative school reform strategies nationally with Expeditionary Learning Schools (ELS) where she was associate director for professional development. After leaving ELS, she co-founded the non-profit education change organization, Paragon Education Network (PEN). At PEN, she continues to craft site-based professional development in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and literacy; to coach principals and teachers; to author curriculum units; and to team on literacy program evaluations. In addition, Barbara teaches literacy classes in an alternative teacher certification program for instructional aides at Western Washington University.

Dale Weiss returned to her Midwest roots after 20 years on the West Coast and has lived in Milwaukee, WI, for the past 18 years. She has been a public school educator for 23 years—as a classroom teacher, grant coordinator, and program implementer. She believes children learn best in a classroom where kindness, community, and clear boundaries are operative. She passionately believes in empowering her students to understand the world around them and to always know there is something they can do to help make the world a better place. To date, she has earned three master’s degrees and a doctorate—all in the field of education. She teaches second grade in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Public Schools.

Marg Wells is an elementary school teacher with over 37 years’ experience working for the Department of Education in Adelaide, South Australia. She has spent the majority of this time teaching in poor, multicultural neighborhoods located in the western suburbs of the city. Marg is currently working in a large, newly built ‘superschool’ that caters to children from birth to year 7. In the classroom, she focuses on place-conscious pedagogy, critical literacy, and cultural inclusivity. She often connects with real places and people in the local community to engage her students in real-life learning. She believes that school activity that is authentic, purposeful and relevant engages students and fosters positive self-belief and a sense of belonging. She has worked for many years with the Universities of South Adelaide and Queensland and teachers to develop her knowledge and inform her teaching.

Ken Winograd is an associate professor in the College of Education at Oregon State University. He teaches literacy courses to undergraduate pre-service
teachers and research methods to masters and doctoral students. He is author of *Good Day/Bad Day: Teaching as a High Wire Act* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2006). His scholarship and teaching focuses on social justice, critical literacy, and climate change.

**Sharon Witt** is a senior lecturer in education at the University of Winchester, where she teaches primary geography on undergraduate and postgraduate Initial Teacher Education programs. Her research interests include geographical fieldwork, creative approaches to teaching and learning, and exploring student teacher and children’s relationships with nature. She is a member of the Geography Expert Advisory Group working with the Department for Education to provide guidance for teachers and teacher educators in the implementation of the 2014 National Curriculum in England. As a consultant for the Geographical Association, she works alongside Paula Owens and Steve Rawlinson leading ‘wildthink’ activities—continuing professional development courses for teachers held inside inspiring landscapes. Her publications include the chapter, “Playful Approaches to Learning Out of Doors” in *Teaching Geography Creatively*, edited by Stephen Scoffham (Routledge, 2013).
INDEX

Abram, D. 81
access 8–9
ACE see Australian Curriculum English
Achieve, Inc. 15–16
ACT 16, 25
action (praxis) 8, 58, 59, 88, 96–7, 193–5;
see also child labor; social justice; social power and literacy; story time
action verbs 134, 137, 138–9
Adelman, H. 19
adjectives 123–4
Allington, R. 25, 26
American Principles Project 17, 18
analytical readers 38
argument 8, 208
Arthur, L. 52
assessment 15–16, 27, 205–6, 207
Auer, M. R. 79
Australian Curriculum English (ACE)
129–30, 131, 133
author bias 5–6, 113
Ayers, W. 209
background knowledge 7, 21, 23–4
Baker, C. 38
Banks, J. 88
Bates, A. see English, K. & Bates, A.
Baum, S. et al. 147–8
biophilia 72
biophobia 72
Boal, A. 57, 58, 59, 60
Bomer, R. 21
Bonnett, M. 80, 81
Bowell, P. 135
Bower, B. & Lobdell, J.: Social Studies
Alive: Our Community and Beyond
118–19, 125
Bowers, C. 81
Briscoe, F. M. et al. 116
Brooks, J. G. 18–19
Buckley, A. 80–1
Bunting, E.: Fly Away Home 89, 90, 91;
So Far From the Sea 91, 92, 93f
Bush, G. W. 14, 182
Cameron, A.: The Most Beautiful Place
162
Cammarata, L. 115
Cannella, G. 11
CCS see Common Core Standards
CCS ELA see Common Core Standards for English Language Arts
CCSS (Common Core State Standards)
see Common Core Standards
cereal boxes 52
Chafel, J. A. et al. 104
Chapman, L. see Puttock, S. & Chapman, L.
child labor 159–63; TV Turn-Off
Week 167, 208; tying knots 166–7;
in United States 161; where clothing is made 159, 164–6, 185; connections to the CCS 168–9; commentary 169;
extensions 170
children’s art 91–2
children’s unexpected and problematic performances 50
Cinderella 133
Civil Rights Movement 162, 193
Clarke, H. 74, 78
close reading 10, 20, 22–3, 24, 25, 26, 207
Cochran-Smith, M. et al. 7
code-breaking 6–7, 130, 131, 133, 139
cognitive development 11
Cole, B.: Prince Cinders 132f, 133
Coleman, D. 20, 22, 24, 25
collaboration 9
College Board 16, 25
Comber, B. et al. 7–8, 11, 46, 47, 50, 87–8
commentaries xii
Common Core Standards (CCS) x, xii, 3–4; argument 208; and assessment 15–16, 27, 205–6, 207; context of corporate education reform 17–18; and critical literacy 9–10, 205–9; criticism of 17, 205; development of 15–17; extension activities 207; text complexity 24–5, 206–7; text-dependent focus 10, 20, 22–3, 24, 25, 26, 207; validity 16–17, 25; commentary 28; see also Common Core Standards for English Language Arts
Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (CCS ELA) xi–xii, 4, 9, 19–20; concerns and questions 25–6; connections xi–xii; instructional shifts 20; (complex text and academic language 24–5; content-rich nonfiction 20–2; text-dependency 22–4, 26); use, interpretation, and assessment 26–7; commentary 28
Common Core State Standards (CCSS) see Common Core Standards
community 10
connections to the Common Core xi–xii
Consumer Union: Buy Me That! (video) 167
cost knowledge 20–1
Coppock, J. 59
Corsaro, W. 98
Cowhey, M. 212
critical consciousness 175–7; power relationships 180; reading for social competence 178–9, 180, 181, 183, 185, 186; reading wide awake 177, 184–6, 187; reading with sociological imagination 177–8, 179, 180, 181, 184, 185, 186; teachers working with students 186–7, 200; working with teachers 181–4; connections to the CCS 188; commentary 188–9; extensions 201–2
critical linguistics in fairy tales 128–30; ACE 129–30, 131, 133; action and saying verbs 134, 137, 138–9; exploring critical linguistics 133–9; exploring reinterpreted fairytales 131–3, 132f; exploring traditional fairytales 131; noun groups 134, 136; process drama 135–9; verb groups 133, 134, 137, 138–9; discussion 140; connections to the CCS 141; commentary 141–2; see also English language learners
critical literacy xi, 3, 88; assumptions 5–6; definitions 4–5, 7, 19, 45–6, 58–9; tools 6
critical literacy frameworks: action-oriented productive dimension 8; four resources 6–7, 130, 131, 132–3, 139; humanizing social structures 8–9, 10; intellectual-analytic dimension 7–8; teaching strategies 8–9
critical reflection 58
critical texts 27, 107, 108, 208; on environmental justice 108; fairytales 128–9, 131–5, 132f; on homelessness 86, 88–90, 91; on Japanese internment camps 60, 64–5, 91, 92, 93f; on multiple perspectives 94–5, 94f, 95f, 97; on poverty 94, 102; on power relations 57–8, 60; on racism 23, 60, 65–6, 87, 90–1, 93–4, 96–7, 102, 104–6, 107; on Sikhism 196; on social justice 108, 194, 195; see also everyday texts
cultures 87–8, 180, 191–3; see also social justice
Curtis, C. P.: Bud Not Buddy 23
Danielson, C. 205–6
December holidays 191–3
Decker, K.: I Belong to the Sikh Faith 196
DeGoogd, G. L. 108
democracy 4, 8
Department for Education, England 80
Department of Education, US 182
Derewianka, B. 134
developmentally appropriate discourse x, 4, 10–12, 44–5, 98, 199
Dewey, E. 209
Dewey, J. 4, 11, 209
Dietz, M. E. 18–19
diversity 9, 15, 191–3, 195–8, 201–2; see also social justice
Donoughue, E. 23
Dramatization 60, 61–6, 62f, 63
Duff, G. G. 212
Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) 15, 181–4
Dyson, A. H. 98

Early Years Foundation Stage (UK) 80
ecophobia 72
ELD (English Language Development) see English language learners
ELLS see English language learners
empowerment 155
Enciso, P. E. 59
English Language Arts see Common
Core Standards for English Language Arts
English language learners (ELLs) 113–14;
adjectives and American culture 123–4;
content 114; critical conversation 116;
critical linguistics and content area study 117–19; explicit instruction of
ELD 114; functional linguistics 114, 115; integrated ELD and content 114–15; language analysis 119–21, 120f; research 116–17; sociopolitical contexts 114, 121–2; discussion 124–5; connections to the CCS 126; commentary 126
environmental issues 71–3, 108; see also nature
Erdrich, L.: The Birchbark House 23
Ernst, J. 81
everyday texts 38, 45; cereal boxes 52;
children’s unexpected and problematic performances 50; definition 46–7;
Mother’s Day catalogues 37–42; snack packages 47–50
extensions xii
fairy tales see critical linguistics in fairy tales
Favreau, J. 24
Felderman, C. 212
fiction vs. nonfiction 20, 21
Finn, P. J. 27
First Grade see critical linguistics in fairy tales; everyday texts; read-alouds; story time
Fordham Institute 18
Foucault, M. 179, 180
“the four corners” see close reading
four resources model 6–7, 130, 131, 132–3, 139
Fox, M.: Feathers and Fools 95, 97
Freebody, P. xi, 6, 7, 19, 38, 39, 98, 100
Freire, P. 4, 8, 21, 59, 193
functional linguistics 114, 115, 128, 130
Gambrell, L. 213
Ganji, J. M. 19–20
Gates, B. 16
Gee, J. 6
geography education 80–1
Goldilocks and the Three Bears 134
Goldwater Institute 17
Goodlad, J. I. 170, 209
Greenblatt, S. 21–2
Guthrie, J. 206, 207, 208
Harste, J. 9
Harste, J. C. 103
Heap, B. 135
Hiebert, E. F. 206–7
Hirsch, E. D. 16
Hoffman, J. V. 212
humanizing social structures 8–9, 10
identity 154–5
ILO see International Labor Organization
Image Theatre 57–8; children’s critical dialogue 61–6, 62f, 63f; critical literacy 58–9; identifying critical texts 60; implementation 60–1; and Theatre of the Oppressed 59; in Third-Grade classroom 59–67; discussion 66–7; connections to the CCS 67; commentary 67
imagination 76, 79
inference 7, 9, 208
Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights: Zoned for Slavery (video) 164–5
intellectual-analytic dimension 7–8
International Labor Organization (ILO) 162, 166
Ivanic, R. 46
Ivey, G. 25, 26

Jago, C. 22
Janks, H. 6, 8–9, 45, 46, 48
Johnston, P. 21, 25, 26
Jones Díaz, C. 11
Joosse, B.: *Stars in the Darkness* 94, 94f
junk mail *see* Mother’s Day catalogues

Keene, E. O. 22–3
Kindergarten *see* read-alouds; snack packages
King, M. L. Jr. 102, 105, 162, 193
knowledge: background knowledge 7, 21, 23–4; commonsense knowledge 39; content knowledge 20–1; funds of knowledge 201
Kohl, H. 12, 100
Krupinski, L.: *Best Friends* 60, 65–6
Kushner, T. 24

language 4, 5
Lankshear, C. 38
Lawson, M. *et al.* 211
Lee, C. *et al.* 87
Leinert, C. 177–8, 180
Leopold, A. 73
Levine, E.: *I Hate English* 57, 60
Levison, M. *et al.* 4–5
Linkletter, A. 57
literary comprehension 6–7
literature 21–2
Lobdell, J. *see* Bower, B. & Lobdell, J.
Lou, R. 72–3, 74, 78, 79
Luke, A. xi, 6, 7, 19, 38, 39, 98, 100

MacDonald, A.: *Beware of the Bears!* 128, 134–5, 137–8
McGovern, A.: *The Lady in the Box* 86, 87, 88–9, 90
McLaughlin, M. *et al.* 108, 211
McPeake, J. 206
magic 70, 81–2
Maloch, B. 21
Mathis, W. J. 16
Mayol, P. 154, 155
meaning 7, 9, 22, 26–7, 80, 115, 124, 130, 208
Miller, D. 22–3
Miller, W.: *The Bus Ride* 94

Mochizuki, K.: *Baseball Saved Us* 60, 64–5
Moll, L. 201
Moss, S. 73
Mother’s Day catalogues 37–8; analytical readers 38; commonsense knowledge 39; critically framed questions 39; everyday texts 38; the process 39; questioning commonsense understandings 39–40; reflecting on what happened 40–2; connections to the CCS 42; commentary 43
motivation 25, 98, 206, 207
multiculturalism *see* diversity
multiple intelligences 9
multisensory experiences 78–9

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 207
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) 11
National Curriculum for England 80
National Governors Association (NGA) 15–16
National Reading Panel 181
National Trust (UK) 73
nature 70–1; elves 75–8, 77f, 81–2; emotional connection with 71–2, 73, 78–9; environmental education 71–3; implications for children’s engagement 81–2; intrinsic value 75; natural magic of place 74, 76–8, 79, 81; nature deficit 73–4, 81; nature-naivety 74, 81–2; pre-service teachers 78–81, 79f; connections to the CCS 82; commentary 83
Near, H. 199
neighborhood *see* social power and literacy
Nespor, J. 155
Neuman, S. 213
*The New York Times* 18
No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 14–15, 21, 66; and CCSS 16, 17, 18, 19, 20; Reading First 15, 182, 184
nonfiction text 20, 21
noun groups 133, 134, 136

Obama, B. 14, 15, 24
Ohanion, S. 213
Orr, D. 71–2, 73, 74
Oxenbury, H. *see* Trivizas, E. & Oxenbury, H.
Parker, D. L.: Stolen Dreams 161, 162
Payne, P. G. 76, 78, 79
peace 195–8
Pelo, A. 211
Pennington, J. L. et al. 18
personal relationships 90–1
Piaget, J. 11
Pimental, S. 20, 22
Pioneer Institute 17, 18
Pipkin, C. 206
place see nature; social power and literacy
play 21
power relations 4, 5, 180; critical
texts 57–8, 60; empowerment 155;
reading as a political act 4; see also social
power and literacy
pre-schoolers 47–50, 51, 52–3
pre-service teachers’ encounters with
nature 78–81, 79f
process drama 135–9
production of texts 5, 8, 91
psycholinguistic approach to reading 7
Puttock, S. & Chapman, L.: The Big Bad
Wolf Is Good 132f
questioning 3, 6, 9, 39–40, 108–9, 208
Race to the Top 15, 16, 66
Rappaport, D.: Martin’s Big Words 94, 194
read-alouds 102–3; the basics 103–4;
planning and implementation 104–6;
connections to the CCS 106–7;
commentary 107; extensions 108–9;
see also story time
reader response theory 7
reading 38; analytical readers 38; close
reading 10, 20, 22–3, 24, 25, 26, 207;
code-breaking 6–7, 130, 131, 133,
139; core reading programs 15, 98,
208; for expanding horizons 201–2;
literal comprehension 6–7; as a political
act 4; psycholinguistic approach 7; see also critical consciousness
Reading First 15, 182, 184
real world experiences 21
Reilly, M. A. 19–20
religion 191–3, 195–8
renarrativization 154–5
Republican National Committee 17
Resource Center of the Americas: Central
American Children Speak (video) 162
resources 211–13
RethinkingSchools.org 195, 202, 209,
212
Ringgold, F.: Tar Beach 107
Robinson, K. H. 11
Rosenberg, V. et al. 59
Rosenblatt, L. 7
saying verbs 134, 137, 138–9
scaffolding 23–4, 25
Schleppegrell, M. J. et al. 115
“school literacy” 38
Schultz, P. et al. 81
science education 80–1
Scieszka, J.: The True Story of the Three
Little Pigs 131–2, 132f, 133
Scieszka, J. & Smith, L.: The Stinky
Cheeseman 132f
Second Grade see child labor; critical
consciousness; everyday texts; Mother’s
Day catalogues; read-alouds; social
justice; social power and literacy
SFL see Systemic Functional Linguistics
Shor, I. 6
Sijie, D.: The Little Chinese Seamstress 27
Simpson, A. 47, 50, 103–4, 108
Singh, P.: The Boy with the Long Hair 196
Smagorinsky, P. 59
Smallman, S. & Droidemy, J.: The Lamb
Who Came For Dinner 132f
Smith, L. see Scieszka, J. & Smith, L.
snack packages 47–50; children’s
unexpected and problematic
performances 50; critical literacy 45–6;
everyday texts 46–7; connections
to the CCS 51; commentary 52;
extension 52
Snow, C. E. 25
Sobel, D. 72–3
social action see child labor; social justice;
social power and literacy
social capital 155
social competence 177, 178, 180, 181,
183, 185, 186
social justice x, 10–11, 190–1; budget cuts
and facing backlash 193–5; and Core
Standards 19; and critical thinking 7,
46; December holidays 191–3;
and democratic community 4, 8;
tragedy at the Sikh temple 195–8;
conclusion 198–9; connections to
the CCS 200; commentary 200;
extensions 201–2; see also critical texts;
read-alouds