

Critically Reading Texts: What Students Do and How Teachers Can Help

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Using the classroom as a space to consider and test out changes in beliefs, gender roles, and power structures can provide students with an opportunity to take control over how they shape their own and one another's lives in a safe environment.

Developing students' abilities to take a critical literacy stance when reading texts is an important aspect of literacy instruction (Stevens & Bean, 2007). Interpreting texts through a critical literacy lens can help students become aware of the messages that texts communicate about power, race, and gender; who should receive privileges; and who has been or continues to be oppressed. As students learn how to engage in critical literacy, they also become more aware of their views and how their views influence their interpretations of texts and interactions with people. Students can begin to take greater control over how they position themselves and each other while transforming their everyday lives (Lobron & Selman, 2007).

Helping students develop a critical literacy stance can be difficult. Students may resist reading and using texts in ways that require them to examine their own beliefs and actions or that are not in line with their cultural and social expectations (Piazza, 2006). They may be uncomfortable moving beyond their views of the world and may express disinterest in reading and discussing texts that challenge their ideas. Additionally they may not feel it is their place to question dominant beliefs or understand how to critically examine their own or others' beliefs.

African American boys have a greater chance of experiencing cultural conflict with texts in school

(Delpit, 1995). They may perceive literacy activities as feminine and not appropriate for boys (Newkirk, 2002) or as irrelevant to their lives (Piazza, 2006). Teachers then have an important role in supporting critical approaches, particularly with African American males, to develop new reading habits and ways of thinking (Tatum, 2005).

Teachers, however, may find it difficult to develop students' critical abilities when they have not been mentored into this practice themselves (Howard, 1999). For teachers, selecting and using texts that challenge or promote ideas different from their own can be difficult (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Teachers may use texts to unintentionally promote their own comfortable and familiar cultural values (McVee, Baldassarre, & Bailey, 2004). Therefore, texts may be used to maintain the status quo, and students may be unaware that the ideas found within texts are open to examination or are reinforcing certain beliefs and actions.

In this article, we present the results of two studies that offer (a) insights into how and why students do and do not use a critical literacy stance to interpret texts and (b) specific suggestions for how teachers might select and use texts in ways that foster students' critical literacy abilities. The studies were conducted separately and were brought together to better understand the need for developing a critical literacy stance among students and teachers.

We begin with an overview of critical literacy and how students' social and cultural backgrounds influence their interpretations of text. Next we explain how the two studies were conducted. Then we present the findings for how students responded to and interpreted texts. We also present findings for how teachers believe students' critical literacy abilities can be developed. We conclude with specific recommendations for classroom practice.

Critical and Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy

Critical literacy theorists view literacy as a political act that can maintain or challenge the status quo (Comber & Simpson, 2001). Texts are viewed as communicating both explicit and implicit messages that promote specific ideologies. The language used in texts is considered to be socially and culturally constructed in ways that can either empower or devalue individuals (Gee, 2000). Critical literacy sees texts as being more than documents that are meant to impart knowledge or entertain readers. Instead, readers actively engage in uncovering the political messages found in texts and take control over how they position themselves in relation to those messages and their understandings of them (Ciardiello, 2004). Reading then becomes about taking an active involvement with texts in ways that allow for multiple interpretations of texts and that reject the view that meaning is fixed and neutral.

Students' interpretations of the messages found in texts can be influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds (Au, 1998). Their backgrounds serve as a framework for interpreting the situations and ideas they encounter in texts and the understandings that arise from them (Bruner, 1986). While students come to school with understandings about different ideologies such as race and gender, they also come with understandings about what it means to read in school (Lewis, 2001). Their engagement with and interpretation of texts is likely rooted in how they think they need to read and respond to texts to be successful in school. Students are more likely to search for correct answers in texts—not challenge or look for implicit messages—because they have internalized such behaviors as the correct way to engage with texts in school. Their understandings and actions can be reconstructed through instruction that values critical literacy while recognizing the framework out of which students make meaning (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Background on the Two Studies

The First Study: Students' Responses to Texts

A case study format (Wolcott, 2001) was used to collect, analyze, and report data; however, a naturalistic

perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) situated the boys' interpretations of texts and lived experiences as the primary methodological approach. Andre, Pablo, and Tony (all names are pseudonyms) were fourth-grade, African American males who attended a year-long after-school literacy program supervised by Susan (second author) at a large urban university. Susan's prolonged engagement with the boys allowed for trust to be developed before the study began.

Each participant was invited to read and discuss four texts and participate in a fifth summative session over a three-week period. The first four sessions followed the same pattern. First, each student silently read a fictional text as it was read aloud on audiotape. Each text was socially, culturally, and linguistically varied (Clifton, 1992; Mochizuki, 1995; Munson, 2000; Winthrop, 1989). Table 1 displays textual details about each book. The stories were read by an African American male for consistency across texts. Having the students follow along with the audiotape decreased the likelihood that their thinking and stance toward each text would be influenced by their individual reading abilities.

After reading each text, participants engaged in an open-ended interview that elicited their thinking and interpretations of each story. The fifth session consisted of a summative interview in which participants discussed their thinking across all four texts. Follow-up questions related to the previous interviews were asked to clarify students' earlier responses.

The Second Study: Selecting and Using Texts to Promote Critical Literacy

Leigh (first author) examined how elementary pre-service teachers' participation in a book club influenced how they thought about selecting and using texts to foster a critical literacy stance with students. Study participants (58 teachers) were enrolled in a literacy methods course across three sections at a university in the southern United States.

Data sources for all participants included (a) an open-ended questionnaire at the start and end of the study, (b) five written responses for each reading per participant (290 total), (c) audiotapes of whole-class discussions, and (d) a two-page response paper that was completed once the book had been read. Additional data sources included (a) audiotapes of small-group discussions for 10 volunteer book clubs

Table 1
Characteristics of Literature in the First Study

	<i>Enemy Pie</i> (Munson, 2000)	<i>Three Wishes</i> (Clifton, 1992)	<i>The Best Friends Club</i> (Winthrop, 1989)	<i>Heroes</i> (Mochizuki, 1995)
Characters	Boy and boy	Girl and boy	Girl and boy	Boy and boys
Culture	Dominant culture	African American	Dominant culture	Japanese American and others
Linguistic format	Standard English	Dialect	Standard English	Standard English
Themes	Enemies Father-son Friendship	Friendship Luck-wishes	Friendship Rules	War enemies Father-son and uncle Friends and discrimination
Setting	Suburban neighborhood	Urban neighborhood	Suburban neighborhood	Rural neighborhood
Grade level	3.9	4.0	3.4	4.0
Reading ease	83.7	85.3	82.2	83.1
Episodes	12	9	11	11
Total words	1510	858	929	1120
Sentences	157	79	141	113
Words per sentence	9.6	10.8	6.5	9.9

and (b) three individual and three group interviews conducted when the study was completed.

Book clubs consisted of four or five members who each read the same text. To determine book club placement, teachers were presented with five texts that examined how elementary students' social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds influenced how they experienced and responded to the reading and writing expectations of their classrooms (Ballenger, 1998; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Dyson, 2003; Lewis, 2001; McCarthy, 2002). Leigh provided the teachers with overviews, as well. Teachers self-selected the texts that they wished to read, thereby placing themselves in the book club for that text. Four or five different book clubs existed within each of the three course sections. (Not every text had a book club during every section.) Table 2 provides information about the book clubs and the texts used.

Book clubs met once a week for 30 minutes over a period of five weeks during their regularly scheduled course. Each group read an agreed-upon section of the text before meeting. Prior to each meeting,

teachers completed a short written response about what they had read. At each book club session, teachers spent the first 15 minutes engaged in a discussion about their text with their book club. Teachers brought their written responses to their meetings to facilitate discussion. The final 15 minutes were spent in a whole-class discussion, facilitated by the course instructor, which allowed teachers to compare and contrast their understandings and reactions across the different texts and book club groups.

Data Analysis

For the first study, Spradley's (1980) thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews. Susan read the transcripts to identify the different categories the boys discussed. Three categories were identified: (1) people/characters, (2) places, and (3) activities. The boys' statements were then sorted into one of the three categories. Next, subthemes for each category were identified. Susan reviewed the data across all three categories and looked for themes that connected the boys' perspectives across categories.

Table 2
Book Clubs and Texts in the Second Study

	Book clubs studying <i>Teaching Other People's Children</i> (Ballenger, 1998)	Book clubs studying <i>Reading Families</i> (Compton-Lilly, 2003)	Book clubs studying <i>The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write</i> (Dyson, 2003)	Book clubs studying <i>Literacy Practices as Social Acts</i> (Lewis, 2001)	Book clubs studying <i>Students' Identities and Literacy Learning</i> (McCarthy, 2002)
Text's theoretical framework	Sociocultural	Sociocultural	Sociocultural	Sociocultural	Identity and sociocultural
Participants' teaching levels	Pre-K	1st	1st	5th and 6th	3rd to 6th
Participants' ethnic backgrounds	Haitian	Predominantly African American	African American	Predominantly Caucasian	Caucasian, African American, Latino/a, and Asian
Researcher's background	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Thematic focus of the text	Teaching literacy to students from different cultural backgrounds	Variations in home/school literacy practices and beliefs	Influence of popular culture on writing	Social codes and practices of literacy culture and development	How schools shape students' identities and literacy development
Total membership	15	9	15	15	4

For the second study, transcripts of the preservice teachers' interviews and discussions as well as all written documents composed by the participants were read. Descriptive codes were assigned to denote explicit patterns that were reoccurring. Patterns were examined within and across each course section, and each text was read to identify similarities or differences that may have existed between course sections or from reading different texts. A time-ordered matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was created to examine if there were trends or changes that occurred over the course of the semester.

As the data for the second study was coded, a pattern emerged of teachers explaining the lessons they had learned. Leigh reviewed the data sources and coded where teachers explained what they had learned from participating in their book clubs. Within this larger code of lessons learned, Leigh noticed that teachers talked about how they would apply their new understandings when selecting and using texts in the future to promote a critical literacy stance among their students. Leigh then reviewed all the data again and coded for the different instructional techniques teachers wanted to apply.

Students' Responses to Text

The boys' responses to text in the first study were based on their understandings of (a) what it meant to be male and (b) the power structures that exist in school and society. The boys expressed enjoyment and agreement with books that showed boys acting in ways that fit their definition of what it means to be male. They agreed that books that showed people facing discrimination or social conflicts due to their race or lack of conformity were accurate depictions of power structures in society. The sections that follow elaborate on the findings summarized here.

Boys' Conceptions of Masculinity

Interviews revealed that the boys' interpretations of texts were connected to their cultural understandings of what it means to be male. Each appeared to share similar experiences and understandings. They explained that boys should not outwardly express emotions, particularly sadness. Boys had to act strong and confident, limit their contact with girls, and avoid what they considered to be feminine behaviors such as crying, being talkative, or playing with girls.

The boys demonstrated more personal connections with texts that presented characters who aligned with their definition of being male. For example, in discussing *Enemy Pie* (Munson, 2000), Andre, Pablo, and Tony commented on an episode where the male characters threw water balloons at neighborhood girls. They explained that though it was not acceptable for boys to talk to or play with girls, it was fine to engage in adversarial interactions with them. In addition, they each emphasized the importance for boys to engage in outdoor activities and kinship through clubhouses or tree houses. In responding to *Enemy Pie*, Pablo explained that he really liked “the part when they had the tree house and they [did]... tricks on their bike.”

The boys were less receptive to texts that presented boys behaving in ways that did not align with their understandings of what it meant to be male. In discussing *Three Wishes* (Clifton, 1992), each expressed concern that the main character, Victor, wore pink and had a girl for a best friend that he often confided in and shared his emotions with. According to the participants, Victor’s behavior was inappropriate for a boy. Though Clifton’s (1992) story was meant to help students question stereotypes about appropriate behaviors for boys and girls, the boys who participated in this study seemed uninterested in doing so and rejected the view that Clifton presented.

Their pattern of responses continued when reading *Heroes* (Mochizuki, 1995). The main character of *Heroes* is Donnie, a Japanese American child who is growing up in a predominately Caucasian, rural neighborhood during the Vietnam War. Donnie’s friends enjoy playing war games. They insist that Donnie should play the enemy since his skin color resembles that of the Vietnamese. When Donnie refuses to play the role of enemy, his friends persist and chase him through the woods. Donnie runs home crying to his father.

The boys responded to *Heroes* by explaining that Donnie’s actions indicated a weakness on his part. Though they did not believe that Donnie should be forced to play the enemy, they each explained that Donnie should have stood up for himself and fought back. Crying and running away, they noted, was an action better suited for girls. None of the boys noted or questioned that Donnie was Japanese, not Vietnamese, and that his friends were positioning him to play the enemy based on a broad generalization and stereotype.

Boys’ Conceptions of Power

The boys’ interpretations of texts were also connected to their understandings of power structures. Interviews revealed that Andre, Pablo, and Tony believed that all boys are sometimes discriminated against based on such things as skin color, physical size, and ability to stand up for themselves. All three participants discussed some of the power structures reflected in the texts they read and how the different structures affected their own and others’ social positioning.

One power structure that each boy discussed was bullying. According to them, physical features or behaviors cause most boys to experience bullying at some point in their lives. Andre recognized that bullying took place in some of the texts he read. However, he stated that he had never been bullied because he was bigger than most boys; therefore, no one would “mess with” him. Andre’s response suggests that he believed a person’s size could affect his or her power and social status.

When Pablo read about bullying, his responses centered on the behaviors that could prevent it. He explained that bullying could be stopped through negotiations and by “some talking.” Pablo shared an example where he had observed two boys insulting each other and engaging in what he considered to be bullying. He approached the boys, talked to them about their differences, and helped them reach an agreement that both could live with. Pablo’s response to reading about bullying was to share a proactive strategy that could stop it. His responses suggest that boys will be better off if they learn good negotiating strategies to assist them if they should find themselves in such a situation. However, his responses did not indicate that people should reconsider their actions toward others and never engage in bullying behaviors.

In addition to bullying, Tony demonstrated an awareness of how racial power structures were presented in literature, in school, and in his own experiences. He noted that most books he read in school did not contain dark-skinned characters and he was “tired of reading about light-skinned people all the time.” Tony accepts the racial power structures in texts and the lack of availability of high-quality African American children’s literature. He said that “it’s okay” and “books don’t need to be changed” to include characters with different ethnicities or

cultures. His rationale of “that’s just the way [books] are supposed to be” suggested that he accepts the social norms, power structures, and the way non-white characters and people are or are not portrayed in literature.

Helping Students Develop Critical Literacy Abilities

Andre, Pablo, and Tony’s responses to the texts suggested that they did not apply a critical literacy stance when reading and interpreting texts. Teachers, however, can work with students in ways that can foster a critical literacy stance and help students take more control over the beliefs and structures that shape their world. During the second study, teachers developed a number of specific ideas for how they might help students engage in critical literacy practices. The four areas that were identified most frequently were

1. Understanding their own beliefs and biases
2. Understanding their students’ views on reading and the world
3. Making issues of power a central focus
4. Moving beyond cultural snippets

The sections that follow present a look at each area as well as the benefits and challenges of applying it in classrooms.

Understanding Your Beliefs and Biases

Teachers noted that it was important to understand their own beliefs and biases to foster a critical literacy mindset within their students. They explained that without such understandings they might select texts and lead discussions that promoted their own ideas and stereotypes. Ms. Ames said,

We all have stereotypes and things that we value, our beliefs. But the thing is, what we think and what we like could dictate the kind of books we have our students read. I know I might be more comfortable reading a book that I agree with and not having to deal with some crazy, difficult topic that might get parents mad at me, but I have to get over that. If all I do is find ways to get kids to read and talk about what I like then I’m forcing them into a box—my box. And I’m not helping them learn how to question the world around them.

Ms. Ames’s concern over disgruntled family members was shared by others. Teachers said that they were “nervous” or “unsure” if they should engage their students in critical literacy instruction because of the controversy it could cause within their schools and communities. “It is easier to follow along with the status-quo,” said Ms. Lincoln, “than to risk getting in trouble even though I think this type of thing is better for students in the long run.”

Of the teachers who questioned the degree to which they should implement critical literacy instruction, the majority indicated that increasing their own self-awareness might raise their confidence to do so. Ms. Emmet noted,

If I can learn about myself better, I can probably have better critical literacy skills. Then I can feel better about how and why I should teach it and be able to rationalize my decisions to students and their families.

In considering how to generate such self-awareness, teachers agreed that it was important to raise questions about their current understandings, how they arrived at them, and the extent to which they were valid. One teacher, Ms. Walker, said it was important to pay attention to how environmental influences contributed to her beliefs without her recognizing it, especially movies. She described how media and popular culture could contribute to her, or anyone’s, beliefs about what life is like for a particular group of people:

Movies create these scenes of urban mothers cracked out on drugs and letting their children starve, and we as a society believe this to be every urban family and this is wrong. So if I used a book that showed this, I would want to make sure my students understood this. And we could even talk about how movies influence how we understand what we read. But if I can’t recognize how these things influence me, how I can help anyone else do it?

Understanding Students’ Views on Reading and the World

Teachers believed it was important to understand how their students viewed reading and what they thought about such issues as race, culture, and gender. Ms. Landon explained that understanding students’ views on reading allowed her to learn their thoughts about why they engaged in reading. Students’ reasons for reading, she said, would not necessarily be aligned

with the goals and purposes she wanted them to achieve. Ms. Darby agreed and further stated,

If we want students to think about some of the questions these books raise for us, then we have to think if they even want to read to think deeper about more serious questions. I would love to be able to have discussions with my students about race and discrimination by having them read and analyze different books. But if they think reading is about—and it seems like many do—restating what happened in a story or learning a set of facts then they aren't going to do that stuff. And knowing that means I can help them move in that direction. But if I don't know that, then I'm stuck.

Teachers explained that developing such understandings, though, could pull them away from the curriculum they were expected to teach. Ms. Owen said,

The school I'm in right now, for reading, the curriculum is pretty tight. There's not a lot of wiggle room. You gotta teach one thing on Monday and then another on Tuesday. It's pretty laid out. Kinda scripted. And I worry about what room there will be for me to learn about my students but also keep up with what I am expected to teach. I can't tell that the district really wants me to learn about my students and help them expand beyond answering some basic questions about a book.

Teachers who recognized such tensions noted that if they were going to learn about students' views they "might have to be a bit sneaky" and find ways to work it into the curriculum that would not disrupt the normal, and often prescribed, flow of the days. They said that they could find ways outside "official reading time" to learn about students' views. Ms. Pennington explained that she could learn about students' views in almost any situation and did not have to be confined to learning about them during formal reading instruction or when texts were being discussed. Teachers who were concerned about the tensions they saw between curriculum and critical literacy suggested that the demands on their time "forced" them to expand the ways they worked with students and "pushed" them to engage with students in much broader contexts than they might otherwise have.

Making Issues of Power Central

Teachers also suggested that texts could be used to help students understand and question the role of power in society and within the classroom specifically. At the classroom level, Ms. Taylor pointed out

that the "politics of power" played a regular role and that "your classroom can become stratified on the basis of gender, age, or social standing." Other teachers discussed how students used their power within classrooms to marginalize and isolate other students who had less power or social status.

Finding ways to address issues of power made some teachers "nervous." They explained that some students might become "angry," "refuse to engage," or "feel threatened" by such instruction. As Ms. Powers said, "If instruction like this makes my students mad, I'm not sure I'm going to know how to respond well."

Teachers recognized that reading and discussing texts was one way they could help students explore the role of power without making the discussion personal. Ms. Hanson explained that students could read and discuss texts that examined racial tensions, the barriers that racism could create for people, and how people worked to overcome racism. After using a text to discuss the role of power and race in society at large, Ms. Hanson said that she could then help students examine how such issues played out in their classroom and what, if anything, they might do to change them. Students could then gain access to the issues being discussed without having to take on personal responsibility until they felt comfortable. She said,

I think you can use books to get kids to see how sometimes they do things that aren't so nice. If I can use books to help them understand this, then I can also use books as a way to help them think about how to make changes and work with each other in ways that are positive. I think you have to be willing to let these big issues take center stage to even think about doing that.

Moving Beyond Cultural Snippets

Teachers noted that students could read and discuss texts to expand their understandings of other cultures and how people around the world lived and thought about things. Doing so, they said, would help their students (a) see that not everyone shared their belief systems and (b) raise important questions about the stances they took on different issues. Therefore, teachers said that they needed to include multicultural texts that represented children and families from different racial, ethnic, and social classes and that presented a number of perspectives.

In using multicultural texts, some teachers explained that it was important to move beyond presenting cultures as "a set of facts and beliefs that we

learn about.” When books were used only for such purposes, students lost out on the ability to question and stretch their own ideas and make changes in their daily lives. According to Ms. Colburn,

Yes, we include cultural snippets...but do we truly seek to take advantage of other cultural practices and studies and the beauty that lies within? I think that we tend to gloss over such a rich resource.

Several teachers believed that helping students learn about people different from them while using that knowledge to question their own beliefs and the society they lived in was a complicated task. However, all seemed to agree that it was a worthwhile one. Ms. Keith said,

Helping them engage with the book beyond facts is going to be hard I think. But if I can help them do it, I think they will be better off. Helping them understand people from other cultures will be something they can use in their everyday lives. We can't make the world any better if we don't understand each other and aren't open to questioning ourselves and the ideas around us.

Getting Started Tomorrow: Critical Literacy in Action

Examining one's own beliefs while also considering students' views, issues of power, and how cultures are represented in texts is a broad charge with almost no clear beginning. However, teachers do not need to be critical literacy experts to venture into such instruction. There are several steps teachers can take to launch instruction that uses critical literacy practices even if they have never done so before (see Table 3 for books that support critical literacy instruction). Teachers who are new to critical literacy practices can explain to their students that such thinking is new to them and that this is an opportunity for them to explore important issues together.

One way to model critical literacy practices for students is to select a thought-provoking book and read some or all of it aloud with students (see Table 4 for suggested books to promote critical literacy in the classroom). Pause periodically and explain the thoughts and questions that surface about different characters and how they are positioned based on characteristics presented in the text.

For example, a teacher reading *Three Wishes* (Clifton, 1992) might ask what the students think of

Table 3
Books That Address How to Teach Critical Literacy

- Aaron, J., Bauer, E.B., Commeyras, M., Cox, S.D., Daniell, B., Elrick, E., et al. (2006). *No deposit, no return: Enriching literacy teaching and learning through critical inquiry pedagogy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Compton-Lilly, C. (2004). *Confronting racism, poverty, and power: Classroom strategies to change the world*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- de la Luz Reyes, M., & Halcón, J.J., (Eds.). (2001). *The best for our children: Critical perspectives on literacy for Latino students*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dozier, C., Johnston, P.H., & Rogers, R. (2005). *Critical literacy/Critical teaching: Tools for preparing responsive teachers*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Evans, J. (2005). *Literacy moves on: Popular culture, new technologies, and critical literacy in the elementary classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Heffernan, L. (2004). *Critical literacy and writer's workshop: Bringing purpose and passion to student writing*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Jones, S. (2006). *Girls, social class, and literacy: What teachers can do to make a difference*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Stevens, L., & Bean, T. (2007). *Critical literacy: Context, research, and practice in the K-12 classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Vasquez, V., Muise, M.R., Adamson, S.C., Heffernan, L., Chiola-Naki, D., & Shear, J. (2003). *Getting beyond "I like the book": Creating space for critical literacy in K-6 classrooms*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Victor having a girl for his best friend. The teacher might invite students to share why they think such relationships are or are not acceptable and may ask students to share how they came to their conclusions. The teacher may offer examples from his or her own life that show the benefits of having diverse relationships and encourage students to do the same. Through modeling and discussions, students can learn that texts present more than facts or a story that has only one message (Conley, 2008).

A second way to engage students in critical literacy is to have them discuss what is valued or ignored within a given text. Teachers may present students with a wide variety of texts such as a newspaper article, a short story, and a website. Students can

Table 4
Books That Can Promote Critical Literacy
in the Classroom

Bunting, E. (2004). *A days work*. New York: Clarion.
 Elya, S.M.. (2006). *Home at last*. New York: Lee & Low.
 Kyuchukov, H. (2004). *My name is Hussein*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills.
 Lord, C. (2006). *Rules*. New York: Scholastic.
 Mobin-Uddin, A. (2005). *My name is Bilal*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills.
 Parnell, P., & Richardson, J. (2005). *And Tango makes three*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
 Patron, S. (2006). *The higher power of Lucky*. New York: Atheneum.
 Ryan, P.M. (2005). *Becoming Naomi León*. New York: Scholastic.
 Weatherford, C.B. (2006). *Moses: When Harriet Tubman led her people to freedom*. New York: Hyperion.
 Wyeth, S.D. (2002). *Something beautiful*. New York: Dragonfly Books.

read the texts and address such questions as, What does this text try to communicate to you? Are there important ideas left out of this text? Is one of these texts more legitimate than another? Initially students' responses may not reflect a critical literacy mindset and may be focused on specific facts they have identified. Teachers can use students' responses to launch discussions that delve deeper into questions and to help students see that texts do more than contain a neutral set of facts and ideas. As students begin to develop their critical literacy abilities, they can learn how to read texts by taking different stances and considering what the texts communicate from different points of view (Behrman, 2006).

Finally, teachers should consider the language that they use and the language they help students develop as they read and discuss texts. Teachers can help students learn how spoken and written words communicate a range of messages including who should be in power and why, who should be ignored, and how people should define themselves if they want to be considered successful (Janks, 2000). Teachers and students can collect examples from texts and their everyday lives that illustrate how language positions people positively and negatively. Such quotes can be used to generate discussion and talk about how teachers and students can be more mindful of the language they read, hear, and use.

Conclusion

The findings and suggestions presented highlight the importance of helping students take a critical literacy stance when reading and interpreting texts. The responses provided by Andre, Pablo, and Tony suggest that students are likely to ascribe themselves to the position they believe they are assigned to. Even when students recognize that societal structures can be harmful, they may believe that the dominant structures in place cannot be changed. Therefore, not knowing how to take a critical stance with texts could result in students perpetuating the status quo.

Teachers can help students develop their critical literacy abilities. Doing so means thinking about one's own views on the world as well as helping students learn to think about and question their own. Teachers will want to provide a supportive, nonjudgmental environment that allows students to examine belief systems. As students learn how to identify messages found in texts and raise questions about how to respond to dominating structures, teachers may wish to help students enact change inside their classrooms. Using the classroom as a space to consider and test out changes in beliefs, gender roles, and power structures can provide students with an opportunity to take control over how they shape their own and each other's lives in a safe environment.

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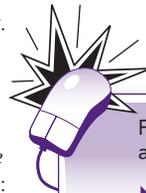
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