

Fostering Critical Conversations through Read-Alouds:
Critical Literacy in Early Elementary

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Abstract

This paper supports the use of a critical literacy framework in the early elementary classroom to promote critical conversations with young students by using the read-aloud to address sociopolitical issues. It outlines the course of a self-study through a unit intended to generate student thinking in regards to issues of identity, human rights, and acting for social justice in a first grade classroom. It concludes with a discussion on the role of a critical literacy framework within the confines of the Common Core State Standards to address early literacy needs.

Introduction

This paper began as a literature review. An effort to synthesize the current body of research regarding critical literacy practices in the early elementary classroom. Over time this paper has evolved. As I struggled with the lived experience of being a critical educator within a system heavily influenced by positivist goals and methodologies (Kincheloe, 2004), it became much more fruitful for me to transition from literature review to self-study (Samaras and Freese, 2009, Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993). As will be outlined in greater detail in the Rationale and Methodology sections of this paper, self-study afforded me the opportunity to confront the core philosophy of my beliefs regarding being a critical educator and contrast that with the lived experience. It allowed me to analyze how my beliefs played out in real-life (Pajares, 1992), to grapple with the notion of how a critical pedagogy framework works within a system that values something very different, but also to journal, reflect, and problematize around this issue in a way that allows other educators to begin this same journey.

I chose to divide this paper in a way that provides a theoretical background and shared understanding of what I mean by being a critical educator, and then diving into a self-study methodology and rationale. The meat of this paper details the actual lived experience of a critical curriculum within the walls of my classroom. In respect to the anonymity of my students and colleagues, and for simplicity's sake, any quotes from others that appeared in my journaling have been labeled simply as "teacher" or "student". This, again, will be outlined in further detail in the Methodology section.

This paper begins just as it was always intended to begin, as a literature review. The first section of this paper synthesizes the current body of scholarship and theory regarding critical literacy practices within the early elementary classroom. This is a relatively small body of research (Vasquez, 2010; Leland, Harste, Huber 2005; Leland and Harste, 2004; Vasquez, 2000) as we still tend to live in a time where educators struggle to see the merits of instituting a critical pedagogy with young children. I will argue, and have come to argue over the course of this past year of self-study, that critical pedagogy is not a thing to use but an identity one becomes. We bring ourselves into our classrooms on a daily basis. If I am to call myself a critical educator, I must be this critical persona regardless of my teacher identity. My teacher identity and my personal identity must be one in the same. Just as the literature on social activism in the classroom suggests (Picower, 2012), to teach activism, I must be an activist in my "real" life.

After a brief review of the literature, this paper will outline a rationale and methodology for conducting a self-study. The goal of this being to explain the use of self-study, as well as the specific methodologies used during this past year as I engaged in this act.

At this point, the paper will detail the lived curriculum. I have provided an eight week unit of study that was used in my classroom of first graders to introduce students to the concepts presented here in this paper. This unit was modified over the course of several weeks as the needs of the lived curriculum changed. Bringing the real-world needs and interest of my students into the curriculum meant that this unit had to be adjusted as the needs of my students changed. After the unit is a series of reflection pieces detailing the struggles and successes of the unit. These reflections are based on daily journaling and self-reflections conducted during the course of the self-study.

At the heart of this paper is a chronicle of a year in the life of an educator seeking to become more critical in their practice. Almost one year ago today, I began planning for a paper that would rationalize the use of a critical literacy framework in work with young children. Within the curriculum I envisioned the read aloud as an opportunity to “sneak” critical literacy into the otherwise routinized, positivist structure that your typical basal reading program finds itself. This became insufficient for me. If I truly wanted to be a critical educator, there was no sense in waiting. I decided instead that while scholarship and theory are certainly important, there is nothing more important to being critically literate than to honestly and openly dive into the deep end. The focus of this paper has always been to demonstrate that the read aloud structure provides a wonderful opportunity to engage in critical literacy practices with young children. Along the line of development, it became painfully obvious to me that this was not enough. What follows is the real struggle with working within this framework. The pain of reflecting on a school system that does not value the hearts, minds, and souls of our youngest learners. The struggle of instituting critical practices when your school demands more, more, more in terms of quantifiable data to track student progress. And most importantly, the absolute

joy that comes with opening your own heart, mind, and soul and sharing that passion with your students. The struggle is very real, but it should not be cast off as doom and gloom. There is hope at the end of the tunnel, and I hope that this paper succeeds in convincing others that this path is well worth taking.

Literature Review

As an instructional pedagogy, critical literacy shares its history with a large body of scholarship devoted to critical pedagogies (Giroux, 1997; McClaren and Lankshear, 1993; Kincheloe, 2004; Freire, 1970), each more or less sharing their roots with Paulo Freire's seminal work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). For the sake of this review, I use the four dimensional framework developed by Lewison, Flint, and van Sluys (2002). The dimensions of this framework include: disrupting the commonplace, considering multiple viewpoints, focusing on the sociopolitical and taking action to promote social justice.

Among this framework is positioned the idea that no text is neutral (Lewison, Leland, Harste, 2002; McClaren, 2009). As Janks (2014, p. 18) argues, "Where we stand literally, socially, and ideologically, shapes the way we construct texts and the way in which we read texts." In essence, all texts are constructed both socially and ideologically by the creator of the text. It is not possible for the text constructor to remove the social, cultural, and ideological contexts for which they position themselves in the world during the creating of a text. Likewise, it is not possible for the reader of text to do the same. There is a relationship that then occurs between the reader and the text which thereafter produces meaning. To put simply, there is a reader, a text, and a poem (Rosenblatt, 1987). The production of meaning derived from the text is tied to the social and cultural constructs of the reader. Therefore, no text can ever be seen as neutral.

As a practice, critical literacy requires a move between the personal and the social. Educators must ask themselves and their students questions such as: What systems of meaning are operating in this text? Which voices are being heard and absent? How do privilege, power, and injustice impact daily life? How do we use literacy to transform inequities and our own complicity in domination? (Lewison, et. al, 2008).

Adopting a critical stance toward texts requires students and teachers to first examine how language and power interact. How language works can be a tool for deconstructing and reconstructing domains of power (Lewison, et. al, 2008). Texts must also be understood in terms of their historical, political, and cultural contexts (McLaren and Lankshear, 1993).

Critical literacy practices are rooted firmly within Luke and Freebody's (1997) four resource model of reading. These resources include: code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text critic. The first two, code breaker and meaning maker, have been the hallmark of the early elementary classroom. Students must be able to decode text fluently and respond to texts with a low-inference knowledge of facts (Winograd, 2015). Within this resource we find the common practices of the early elementary curriculum: recognizing and using the alphabet, sounds in words, graphophonic sources of information, spelling, the use of grammar and punctuation, and recognizing and shaping patterns of letter and sound (Ludwig, 2003).

The second resource of the reader as meaning maker involves the reader's ability to draw on social and cultural background knowledge, to make connections with own experiences, and to relate previous experiences to similar texts (Ludwig, 2003). This resource also has been a staple of the early elementary curriculum, although the recent push from the Common Core State

Standards to derive meaning from texts directly has shuffled this resource to the backburner for many early childhood educators (Au and Waxman, 2015).

While both of these resources are commonplace in the early readers' curriculum in most school systems in the United States, the fourth resource of reader as text critic has failed to find its place amongst early elementary educators. This fourth resource is where critical literacy lives.

Returning to Lewison, et. al's (2002) four dimensions model, I intended to create units of study that covered these dimensions. A brief review defining these dimensions follows.

When Lewison, et al refer to "disrupting the commonplace", they refer to seeing the mundane, every day through new lenses of problematizing (2002). A key component is considering how this text is attempting to position the reader (Luke and Freebody, 1997). Disrupting the commonplace calls for teachers to develop an activist perspective toward their work (Lewison, et al 2002). Within this call for teachers to develop this persona is a call to use texts which provide opportunities to problematize subjects of study (Lewison, Leland, Flint, Moller 2002, Lewison, Leland, Harste, 2000). Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, and Vasquez (1999) outline the following criteria for choosing books with young students that promote this critical analysis:

- They don't make difference invisible, but rather explore what differences make a difference;
- They enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized—we call them "the indignant ones";

- They make visible the social systems that attempt to maintain economic inequities;
- They show how people can begin to take action on important social issues;
- They explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people;
- They help us question why certain groups are positioned as “others.”

The second dimension of critical literacy involves “interrogating multiple viewpoints”. This dimension calls on students and teachers to understand experiences in “the shoes of others” (Lewison, Flint, and van Sluys, 2002). To interrogate multiple viewpoints asks students to consider questions such as, “Who or what is in the text? Who or what is missing from the text?” (McLaughlin and Devoogd, 2004).

The third dimension involves “focusing on the sociopolitical”. This entails moving beyond the personal and into the social and political systems that have led to the development of a text (Lewison, Leland, Harste, 2008). This asks students to consider relationships of power, language of power, and social positioning within Discourses (Gee, 1996). In this dimension, literacy takes on more than its traditional definitions. Literacy is an act of power and the formation of social identities. Literacy provides oppressed groups with an opportunity to participate in the act of humanization (Freire, 1970). When asking students to unravel the social, political, and ideological factors which influence the creation of a text, we are liberating them to be co-constructors of meaning and to act on the injustices they see.

This leads to the final dimension of critical literacy, which is defined as “taking action to promote social justice”. This dimension involves what Freire referred to as praxis, or reflection and action (Freire, 1970). Literacy becomes the means to achieve social justice (Lewison, Flint, and van Sluys, 2002).

Using these four dimensions of critical literacy, I created an initial unit of study focused on identity, fairness, and human rights. I attempted to work through each of these dimensions in a way that provided students with authentic opportunities to engage in praxis. The read-aloud became a natural way to infuse this into the curriculum. It appeared to be a non-invasive, open space that even in the most staunchly positivist environment, no one would dare shut down as being too “radical”.

I relied heavily on teacher-generated narratives of critical literacy practice (Kuby, 2013; Heffernen and Lewison, 2000; Vasquez, 2010) to develop an idea of where to begin and problems I might run into. These narratives provided crucial support in framing my practices within an early elementary environment.

Rationale

During this self-study, I took on the belief that critical pedagogy, and within that critical literacy, is founded on an idea that schooling “for self and social empowerment is ethically prior to a mastery of technical skills” (McClaren, 2003, p. 188). Of importance to me was questioning the goal of schooling. Is the goal of schooling the mastery of basic skills, or is the goal of schooling to produce an educated populace to promote the ideals of democracy? (Dewey, 1916)

I continue to struggle with where I fall along this trajectory. I instituted this framework into an environment that I felt was not supportive of the ideals of the latter. I have provided a narrative of this reflection in the final section of this paper.

Using a self-study, I hoped to investigate my own hidden biases within my instruction. To institute this critical framework, I needed to be careful of the ways in which I inputted my own knowledge and beliefs. It is certainly possible for even the best intentioned educator to fall right back into the role of depositing knowledge. I would argue it is also certainly possible to seek to institute a problem-posing curriculum and merely bank your own thoughts into the heads of students (Freire, 1970). For this reason, I chose self-study as a way to reflect on my practice and to identify times where this depositing might have occurred incidentally.

I began to think of my role as the knowledgeable insider within a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). If my students were to genuinely and authentically become the type of activist I envisioned, they must first begin on the periphery of this community and slowly integrate into the practices of the community. My role, then, was to provide an environment conducive to moving these students to the center of this community of practice. Of importance to me in my self-reflections was how this environment was created and nurtured.

I developed two primary questions of inquiry at the start of the school year:

1. How am I promoting/hindering critical conversations through my use of language and power in the classroom?
2. What is the ratio of teacher-talk to student-talk and how is this impacting the types of discourse in the classroom?

My goal during self-study was to assess myself on these two questions. If I am cognizant of the structures I am putting in place and actively aware of the nature of discourse occurring, then I should begin to see changes in my students' ability to discuss these issues. What follows is my fairly simple methodology for self-reflection, as well as a discussion of the classroom context in which students entered the school year.

Methodology

Context

My classroom consists of thirty students in a high-poverty, urban school in a major metropolitan area. According to available quantifiable data sources, students entered significantly behind in measures of reading fluency, comprehension, and early foundational reading skills. At the beginning of the school year, 11.1% of students were assessed as on grade-level according to a comprehensive assessment of early literacy skills (STEP, University of Chicago). This may deter some from attempting to forge a critical consciousness among students who are struggling with early foundational skills, but I believe that these are the students most in need of such a pedagogical shift. Demographically, 100% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. In addition, approximately 25% of the students were identified by the district as English Language Learners.

Data Collection

I wanted to maintain as simple of data sources as possible to ensure that I was being transparent in my own self-evaluation. In retrospect, additional data sources such as video or audio recordings to transcribe student conversations may have been helpful to track ratios, but the true nature of my study was to assess my own biases and reflect on the actions these biases may have caused. As such, self-reflecting through journaling provided the best opportunity to

really investigate my own thinking and how that thinking played out in the lived experiences. This paper includes a selection of these reflections written in a narrative format to provide as clear of a picture as possible into the discourse at play inside of my classroom.

There is one area sorely missing from my self-study. Having a collaborative, critical friend to reflect with is crucial to conducting a self-study. Working in an environment where this type of thinking is nearly nonexistent, having a critical friend proved to be difficult. Because I felt that this was such an important piece of my study, I used my wife as a critical friend. Though an outsider to my community of practice, her insights provided some push-back to my own reflections and allowed me to think in some new ways regarding my practice and the ways in which students interpreted my practice.

As far as the components of self-study are concerned (Samaras and Freese, 2009), I conducted daily journaling on lesson outcomes, weekly reflection pieces based on this journaling, weekly meetings with my critical friend, and a final self-analysis at the conclusion of my unit of study based on these data sources. This analysis is provided at the end of this paper. The following section outlines the first unit of study presented to my first grade students at the start of the school year.

Unit of Study

Unit Framework
Unit Title: Discovering Identity, Culture, and Human Rights
<p>Unit Overview: This unit is designed as an introductory unit to investigating texts from a critical literacy framework. By combining the English Language Arts curriculum with Social Studies, this cross-curricular unit looks to guide students to think about the world around them and their identity in this world. With a particular emphasis on concepts of community, this unit will explore the nature of community, its role in identity formation, and how community and family units can work as agents of change to the world around them. As students' progress to thinking about larger issues of community, they will be faced</p>

with decisions involving fairness and equality. Students will investigate the difference between fair and equal. They will analyze how fairness plays out in their daily lives and the lives of others. This unit utilizes a four dimensions model of critical literacy (Lewison, et. al 2002) and explores a four resource approach to reading (Luke and Freebody 1997, Luke 2000). The Interactive Read-Aloud is featured as the primary vehicle for leading critical conversations around these issues. Before, during, and after each read-aloud students are engaged in a problem-posing sequence of questioning (McLaughlin and Devoogd, 2004). This line of questioning seeks to get to the root of the central message hidden within the text of the book. A typical line of questioning might look like: Who or what is in the text? Who or what is missing from the text? What is marginalized? What does the author want you to think? What story might an alternative text tell? How can information from the text be used to promote justice?

This unit framework contains only the read-aloud component of the weekly lessons. Each day also includes daily phonemic, phonetic, vocabulary, and word study work, as well as shared reading and writing experiences. These goals are not explicitly stated in this unit overview, as the goal of the unit focuses on the role of the read-aloud. It is assumed that others can adapt this unit framework within the confines of their own reading program by substituting these lessons where necessary.

Subject:

ELA and Social Studies

Number of Days: 40

Number of Weeks:

8

Established Goals:

(Common Core and TN Standards)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.1

Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.2

Identify the main topic and retell key details of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.3

Describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.5

Know and use various text features (e.g., headings, tables of contents, glossaries, electronic menus, icons) to locate key facts or information in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.6

Distinguish between information provided by pictures or other illustrations and information provided by the words in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.7

Use the illustrations and details in a text to describe its key ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.8

Identify the reasons an author gives to support points in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.9

Identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or

procedures).

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.1.1

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.SL.1.1

Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about *grade 1 topics and texts* with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.2

Ask and answer questions about key details in a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.

Tennessee State Social Studies Standards

1.1 Explain with supporting details the culture of a specific place, including a student's community and state.

1.2 Define multiculturalism as many different cultures living within a community, state, or nation.

1.4 Use collaborative conversations with diverse partners to discuss family customs and traditions.

1.5 Present the student's family culture through the use of drawing, writing, and/or multimedia.

1.24 Summarize in their own words, that a map is a representation of a space, such as the classroom, the school, the neighborhood, town, city, state, country or world.

1.35 Place events in students' own lives in chronological order.

1.36 Produce complete sentences to describe people, places, things and events with relevant details that relate to time, including the past, present, and future.

1.37 Interpret information presented in picture timelines to show the sequence of events and distinguish between past, present, and future.

1.38 Compare ways individuals and groups in the local community and state lived in the past to how they live today, including forms of communication, types of clothing, types of technology, modes of transportation, types of recreation and entertainment.

Enduring Understandings

- People have the power to make the world around them a better place.
- There are (at least) two sides to every story.
 - People in a community have diverse perspectives on issues.
 - People have certain basic rights that cannot be taken away.
 - People can work together peacefully to make changes when things are not fair.
 - The law is not always fair.
 - The intention of the law is not always how a law is carried out.
 - Nonviolent protest can make waves of impact throughout a country.
 - Our self-identities are an important part of being human.
 - Fair and equal describe two different sets of values.

Essential Questions

The questions that will lead to my students' understanding of the unit's content?

- How are our identities shaped and shared by those around us?
- How can we impact our community in a positive way?
- Why is it important to consider different perspectives?
- How can I think about things from someone else's point of view?
- How would this story be different if told by someone else?
- How do the words someone uses to tell a story change the way the story is told?
- What is the importance of being a part of a community?
- Why do all people have basic rights? Where do they come from?
- How can people work together to make changes in their community or world?
- What can we do when we feel a law or rule is not fair?
- What is the difference between a right and a law?
- Who am I? How did I become this way?

<p>Knowledge</p> <p><i>At the end of this unit, students will know....</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities are made up of diverse perspectives, roles, and responsibilities. • There are always two sides to every story. • No text is neutral, and the reader must investigate the author’s bias. • People’s identities are created through many factors, including their families, communities, and cultural backgrounds. • Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, John Lewis, and Diane Nash were leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in Nashville and the nation. • Our country is made up of laws derived from the Constitution. • The Civil Rights Movement was a nonviolent struggle for equal rights. It has not ended. • Social activism can be taken on by children as well as adults. • All humans were born with certain <i>unalienable</i> rights. 	<p>Skills</p> <p><i>At the end of this unit, students will be able to...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the speaker in a story and describe their perspective. • Describe a story from multiple viewpoints. • Identify key details in a text. • Identify character, setting, and plot in a story. • Compare and contrast story elements across texts. • Compare and contrast details within a text. • Describe the difference between texts that tell a story and texts that give us information. • Use illustrations and pictures to identify the main details of a passage of text. • Describe how illustrations and pictures add information to a text. • Investigate a text from multiple viewpoints. • Analyze an author’s intended message by providing evidence from the text. • Determine the neutrality of a text and how it was made that way. • Ask questions about a text to determine the author’s purpose. • Answer text-dependent questions by identifying sufficient evidence.
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Stage 2: Assessment Evidence

<p>Performance Tasks: <i>Performance Indicators: Projects, Unit Tests, Academic Prompts, etc.</i></p> <p>-Identity Illustration: Students will create a self-representation of themselves using whatever medium they choose. Students may use pictures, words, or a combination of both. Students will share their self-representations with their classmates.</p> <p>-Graffiti Wall: Students will create a wall of quotes from <u>Martin’s Big Words</u> and over the course of the unit will add pictures and words that they feel represent the thoughts Martin conveyed.</p>	<p>Other Evidence: <i>Formative Assessment, Daily Exit Tickets, etc</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning Log: Students will complete Learning Log entries following readings. These entries will take the form of drawings or writing that demonstrates the students’ thoughts about the topic at hand. • Quantitative Assessment Data: Student comprehension will be monitored using the STEP Assessment from the University of Chicago. This is mandated by the school. While STEP is a comprehensive assessment, students’ ability to answer inferential
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-Writing From Different Perspectives:
 (1) Students will write their own version of a character in Voices in the Park.
 (2) Students will write the Story of Ruby Bridges from the perspective of another character in the story (the teacher, US Marshals, angry white parents, etc.). Students will juxtapose their story with the one Ruby Bridges recalls in Through My Eyes.

-Community Action Plan:
 Students will work to develop a community action plan to solve a community problem they see. Students will outline the problem, develop possible solutions, and create documents they feel will be necessary to carry out the plan. Student groups will present their action plan to the class.
 -"I Have a Dream" writing prompt: After hearing and reflecting on Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech, students will begin writing their own "I Have a Dream" speech to be published in a school-wide magazine.

-Letter writing: Students will work collectively to write a letter to an influential person to get something changed. Students will later identify an issue they wish to see changed and write a letter to the person they think would best be able to help them fix this problem.

comprehension questions will be used as a data point for whether students are successfully applying questioning techniques from instruction.

- **Teacher Questioning:** Teacher will emphasize small-group and individual questioning during work time to allow ALL students the opportunity to think and process the big ideas of the unit. There is a recognition that some students may feel uncomfortable discussing larger issues in front of the entire class.
- **Teacher Observation:** Through extensive journaling and self-reflection, teacher will consider-how is student thinking changing? How is it staying the same? What assumptions are still being made or are still left on the table? How are students connecting with texts?

Stage 3: Build Learning Plan

Discovering Identity, Culture, and Human Rights

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
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WEEK ONE OVERVIEW:

The first week of the unit of study asks students to consider their own personal identities and how those identities are created, shared, and changed over time. Students will investigate issues of skin color and culture as they ponder who they are and why they see themselves in that way.

This study will begin using Sandra Pinkney’s wonderful texts Shades of Black, Rainbows Around Me, and I Am Latino: The Beauty in Me. Students will be asked to discuss core identity characteristics such as:

1. How do I see myself?
2. What makes someone black or white?
3. Who decides what someone is or is not?

After discussing these critical issues, students will begin work on a self-portrait of themselves. Students will prepare this self-portrait using whatever means they wish and will share their work with their classmates as an introductory opportunity.

The week concludes with introducing the development of a problem-posing (Freire, 1970) perspective. Through the reading of Sharon Dennis Wyeth’s Something Beautiful and Jacqueline Woodson’s The Other Side, students are introduced to questioning the positioning and purpose of an author’s stance. Through a series of problem-posing questions, students are asked to reach the final conclusion, “What does the author want me to think after reading this?”

During the development of this problem-posing perspective, students are asked to consider critical decisions made by the author, such as: Why did the author choose to have the character be a black girl? Would the story have been different had she made a different decision? Why is the story set where it is? Is this a fair representation of a neighborhood?

As students reach Wyeth’s ending and see how the little girl has taken it upon herself to be an agent of change in her community, students are asked to consider what message this sends to all of us. Students are invited to respond to the reading through writing or illustrating in their Learning Logs.

As students hear Woodson’s The Other Side, they will be asked to consider the following:

- What is different about the girls on each side of the fence?
- Why do they make fun of their friend for wanting to talk to the little girl on the fence?
- Why do the girls sit on the fence? What is the purpose of the fence?
- Why did the author choose to put a fence in the story? What are they trying to make us think about?

Texts Used:

Something Beautiful by Sharon Denis Wyeth

The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson

Shades of Black by Sandra Pinkney

I Am Latino: The Beauty in Me by Sandra Pinkney

A Rainbow Around Me by Sandra Pinkney

WEEK ONE

Essential Question:
-How are our identities shaped and shared by those around us?
Who am I? How did I become this way?

Shades of Black, I Am Latino, A Rainbow Around Me

TLW analyze and self-reflect on their own self-identity.

TLW create a representation of themselves to share with classmates.

Shades of Black, I Am Latino, A Rainbow Around Me

TLW analyze and self-reflect on their own self-identity.

TLW create a representation of themselves to share with classmates.

Something Beautiful

TLW investigate an author’s stance through a problem-posing process.

TLW assess the fairness of representations of people in a text.

The Other Side

TLW investigate an author’s stance through a problem-posing process.

TLW assess the fairness of representations of people in a text.

WEEK TWO OVERVIEW:

During the second week of the unit, students move from problem-posing the intended message into an investigation of language use and language purpose. Using Martin’s Big Words (Rappaport, 2001) as an anchor text, students dive deeper into word choice and language use. Bringing back Woodson and Wyeth’s work, students make connections across these texts to investigate how an author’s intended message is constructed and altered through the word choices that author makes. Students are asked to explore the meaning behind Martin Luther King’s “big words” and connect these words to their own lives.

<p>WEEK TWO How do the words someone uses to tell a story change the way the story is told?</p>	<p>Martin's Big Words TLW investigate word choice and determine meaning of unfamiliar words through context.</p>	<p>Martin's Big Words TLW investigate word choice and determine meaning of unfamiliar words through context.</p>	<p>Martin's Big Words + Something Beautiful TLW make connections across texts to investigate word choice and meaning</p>	<p>Martin's Big Words + The Other Side TLW make connections across texts to investigate word choice and meaning</p>
<p>WEEK THREE OVERVIEW:</p> <p>Students have spent two weeks investigating how an author's message is construed through words. During week three, students are asked to consider how an author's message does not always tell the whole story. When we read a piece of writing, we are hearing from only one perspective. Perspective and point of view are studied in depth during week three as students are asked to consider alternative perspectives on issues. Students are invited to consider that there are (at least) two sides to every story and the important of this message is carried through Anthony Browne's <u>Voices in the Park</u>. Students spend two days interrogating the multiple viewpoints on display in Browne's story and investigating how one's perspective alters the way they see the world around them.</p> <p>Following the reading of <u>Voices in the Park</u>, students begin to investigate perspective and point of view through the story of Rosa Parks as told by a young boy in the story <u>Back of the Bus</u> by Aaron Reynolds. Students are asked to consider how others would tell this story as they also confront the issue of fairness and equality. What makes things fair? How are people equal? What is more important, being fair or being equal?</p> <p>In addition, students begin problem-posing the role of rules and laws in society. What do we do if we feel a law is unjust? Is it acceptable to break an unjust law or rule? When do we decide?</p>				
<p>WEEK THREE How can I think about things from someone else's point of view? -How would this story be different if told by someone else?</p>	<p>Voices in the Park TLW investigate multiple perspectives in the telling of a story.</p>	<p>Voices in the Park TLW investigate multiple perspectives in the telling of a story.</p>	<p>Back of the Bus TLW problematize fairness and equality. TLW retell a story from multiple perspectives.</p>	<p>Back of the Bus TLW problematize fairness and equality. TLW retell a story from multiple perspectives.</p>

WEEK FOUR OVERVIEW:

Students have spent the first three weeks investigating multiple viewpoints, problem-posing meaning, and grappling with the neutrality of the texts they have heard read-aloud. During Week Four, students move from into thinking about how this thinking applies to the world around them. Week Four invites students to think about how they have an impact on the world around them.

Students begin the week with The Lady in the Box by Ann McGovern (1997) as they consider how families can have an impact on the community around them in a positive way. Students are asked to consider how their family lives have an impact on who they are as a person, as well as how their family can work to solve community problems. Students are asked to consider a problem in their own community and how they would work to solve it. The class will brainstorm problems they see and students will consider the actions taken in The Lady in the Box, as well as other stories such as Something Beautiful, to devise a solution to this community problem.

<p>WEEK FOUR How can we impact our community in a positive way?</p>	<p>The Lady in the Box TLW investigate the author’s purpose. TLW make connections to self and reflect on taking action on a text.</p>	<p>The Lady in the Box TLW investigate the author’s purpose. TLW make connections to self and reflect on taking action on a text.</p>	<p>Work Day TLW develop and create an action plan for community improvement.</p>	<p>Work Day TLW develop and create an action plan for community improvement</p>
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WEEK FIVE AND SIX OVERVIEW:

Up to this point, students have investigated issues of fairness and equality, identity and culture, and interrogating multiple perspectives in a text. During the following weeks of study, students will use these lessons to begin to analyze key points in the Civil Rights Movement (using the Civil Rights Movement as a primary vehicle to discuss issues of rights, laws, fairness, and equality). Students will learn about key figures in the movement: Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Diane Nash, as well as children like Ruby Bridges to see how this movement is portrayed in a variety of texts.

Lessons will focus on having students analyze points of view and interrogating multiple viewpoints as they disrupt common notions of stories told (for instance that Rosa Parks was “tired” and this is why she did not give up her seat).

Students will begin by investigating the role of human rights throughout the world and within our country. During this investigation, students will be asked to think more deeply about our differences and our identities as they look to formulate a working understanding of equal rights for all people. Students will be introduced through the read-aloud *Have the Right to Be a Child* where they will be presented with the fact that the United States has failed to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Students will begin thinking of ways they can work to change this.

After this reading, students will investigate equal rights in school desegregation, beginning with the story of 1st Grader Ruby Bridges. Students will compare and contrast the struggle of Ruby Bridges with that of Sylvia Mendez in the story Separate is Never Equal.

During Week Six students will embark on a study of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Students will learn about Dr. King’s life from multiple perspectives in order to gain an understanding of the man from different points of view. Students will think about what it means to be nonviolent and how Dr. King worked under nonviolent means to change things. Students will problem-pose texts as they consider who wrote a text and for what purpose. Students will also be asked to think deeply about the role of laws in our country. Guiding student discussions will be the question: What do we do about unfair laws? Is it OK to break a law?

<p>WEEK FIVE</p> <p>Why do all people have basic rights? Where do they come from?</p> <p>How would this story be different if told by someone else?</p> <p>-How do the words someone uses to tell a story change the way the story is told?</p>	<p>I Have the Right to Be a Child</p> <p>TLW develop ways to take action after the reading of a text.</p> <p>TLW assess the meaning of the word "right" and reflect on human rights.</p> <p>TLW compare and contrast rights and laws.</p>	<p>The Story of Ruby Bridges</p> <p>TLW investigate fairness in the laws of their country.</p> <p>TLW interrogate the message behind a text.</p>	<p>The Story of Ruby Bridges</p> <p>TLW develop counter narratives using multiple viewpoints.</p> <p>TLW investigate the role of the illustrator in telling a story.</p>	<p>Separate is Never Equal</p> <p>TLW compare the struggles of people across stories and texts.</p>
<p>WEEK SIX</p> <p>Why is it important to consider different perspectives?</p> <p>-How can I think about things from someone else's point of view?</p> <p>-How would this story be different if told by someone else?</p>	<p>As Good as Anybody</p> <p>TLW compare and contrast the lives of two characters in a story.</p>	<p>My Uncle's Big Heart</p> <p>TLW compare a perspective shared in text with a perspective from another text to analyze their similarities and differences.</p>	<p>March On!</p> <p>TLW compare a perspective shared in text with a perspective from another text to analyze their similarities and differences.</p>	<p>I Have a Dream</p> <p>TLW analyze word choice and determine how language use promotes a message.</p>

WEEK SEVEN AND EIGHT OVERVIEW:

As students continue to problem-pose the role of laws in protecting the rights of the people, they will begin to study what happens when a law is unfair. The study will focus on the life of Rosa Parks, a prominent figurehead in the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. Students will learn how the actions of one can influence the actions of many. Students will begin thinking about acts of protests and how people can fix problems they see through nonviolent means. Students will return to a previously read book, The Back of the Bus, to begin thinking about the different narratives that exist in the telling of the Rosa Parks story.

Students will then be presented with a differing perspective and be asked to consider the merits of both perspectives as they think through the words of Malcom X. At the conclusion of the final week of study, students will have developed a community problem that they seek to solve. They will return to their earlier thinking from Week Four to decide the methods they wish to use to solve this community problem. They will address their ideas with the class.

Week Seven and Eight Objectives:

TLW investigate multiple viewpoints in telling a story.

TLW compare and contrast how the lives of people are portrayed by an author.

TLW interpret and argue which representations are fair or not based on available sources.

TLW compare and contrast the actions of people in multiple texts.

Book Choices:

Back of the Bus by Aaron Reynolds

Malcom X by Walter Dean Meyers

Boycott Blues by Andrea Pinkney

If a Bus Could Talk by Faith Ringgold

Sit-in by Andrea Pinkney

Unit Bibliography of Selected Texts

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Coles, R. (1995). *The story of ruby bridges*. New York: Scholastic.

Farris, C. (2008). *March on!* New York: Scholastic.

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Meyers, W. (2003). *Malcolm X: A fire burning brightly*. Ballantine Books.

Michelson, R. (2008). *As good as anybody*. New York: Dragonfly.

Nelson, K. (2012). *I have a dream*. New York: Randomhouse.

Pinkney, A. (2008). *Boycott blues*. Harper Collins.

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Serres, A. (2013). *I have the right to be a child*. Groundwood Books.

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Reflections

Reflections on cultural identity.

Figuring there was no better time than now to hit the hornet's nest, I asked the children a loaded question from the start. I prefaced by explaining to them that this week we are going to discuss our identities. I defined identity as who we see ourselves as being. Then, I threw *the* question at them. "How do you identify yourself?"

"I'm black," one boy shouted out.

"O.K., does anyone else consider themselves black?" Several more hands shot up. I asked the students to get in groups based on how they identified themselves. They quickly segregated themselves into three main groups: black, white, and a group of Spanish-speaking students.

"Nuh-uh, she's white," the same boy from before shouted out. "You gotta get up there with them." He was referring to the little girl who sat quietly on the carpet, unmoved since the activity began. She contemplated for a moment and then responded, "But I'm not white." Discussion generated all over the classroom.

"Yes, you are white. You gotta be with them over there," one girl jumped in. The girl explained that her dad spoke Spanish, even though her mom spoke English. She wanted to go to the group of Spanish-speaking students. Confirmed in her decision, she stood up and joined this group of students.

Discussion began again amongst the students who did not understand why the Spanish-speaking students broke themselves off from the group deemed as "white". This led to an opportunity to discuss our cultural identities and how they do not necessarily have anything to do

with the color of our skin. Amid the discussion, it was noticed that there was one other little girl torn between where to go. The kids urged her, “You’re supposed to come over here,” motioning her to join a group. But the little girl did not move. She looked up at me, “But, I’m light-skinned.”

“Light-skinned means black,” one boy chimed in from the back.

“Nuh-uh, she might be white. What are you?” The questions began pouring in.

The young girl looked at the three groups, eyes locked on her as she made her decision; she reluctantly got up and moved to the group of “black” students, although it was clear she was still undecided. I decided this would be an excellent time to discuss with students the problems of looking only at the colors of our skin. I asked students to gather back on the carpet. Once returned, I had four students who had joined the “black” group of students to stand back up and stand next to one another. “Which one of them is black?”

“All of them!” several students shouted.

“Well, when I look, it looks like all of their colors are different,” I added in.

“Yeah, yeah, she’s dark skinned, but he’s light.”

“So, which one is black?” I prodded again.

The wheels were beginning to turn as students’ confidence turned to perplexity. Quizzical looks on their faces, I asked them, “What makes a person black or white?”

The discussion which followed reminded me of a conversation I overheard several years earlier on the playground between two African-American fourth grade students, “His momma

must be black. He's mixed," one said to the other. Finally, failing to agree, the two girls approached me, "Are you black or white?" If we are talking skin color, my skin is as pale white as they come, but it occurred to me that the girls were not necessarily talking about skin color. This was an identity conversation.

The first graders in front of me now, still lined up, began holding their hands out next to one another to judge the pigmentation. They tried to make sense of the multiple colors they saw in the room and lined one another up according to perceived lightness or darkness. They finally came to the conclusion that this was proving more difficult than they initially imagined.

This became a perfect transition into our initial unit, investigating cultural identity. I shared the wonderful photography in Sandra Pinkney's *Shades of Black* (2000), *A Rainbow All Around Me* (2002), and *I Am Latino: The Beauty in Me* (2007). Children drew pictures of themselves to show their own cultural identity.

It was not lost on me that I was in a difficult position. My first initial struggles with discussing identity came from my awareness that I was a part of a dominant cultural group. I held at least two positions of authority that I could see at the moment: I was part of a historically dominant cultural group as a privileged, white male, and I was the authority figure in the classroom by the very nature of the student-teacher relationship that is created by virtue of our schooling system. No matter how hard I tried, I could not remove this obvious tension. However, I made my best attempt not to ascribe identities to the children that they themselves did not ascribe. I tried my best to be on the outside of the decision-making while children pondered their own identity and let the discussion lead itself to a decision.

This is not to say that there were not troubling times. One boy pointed and laughed at another boy standing in a group he identified. My initial reaction was to chastise the boy, to call him out and punish him for his lack of respect for cultural differences, but I held myself back. If we were to truly become cognizant of both our differences and our similarities, what would it do to the conversation for me to shut down this response? This was a learning opportunity not just for this boy but for his classmates as well. Instead I chose to question, “What makes you have that response?” The question took the boy aback. It was clear he was not really sure why, only that he had never really dealt with those who were different from him.

Reflections on neighborhood identity.

After reading Sharon Wyeth’s *Something Beautiful* (2002), my students and I began to investigate what seemed to be fair representations in the book. I developed my line of questioning to probe students to think of whether or not this book provided a fair representation for neighborhoods that they knew.

Teacher: Let’s take a look at this picture since it has a lot going on. Do we think this is a fair picture of what a neighborhood looks like?

Student 1: No. Neighborhoods don’t look like that. I only see black people in my neighborhood. That picture has white and black people in it. I don’t think neighborhoods look like that.

Teacher: Does anyone else feel that way? Is it true that neighborhoods can’t look like this?

Student 2: That’s not true. I sometimes see white people where I live.

Student 1: (shaking her head) I’ve never seen that before.

The conversation was an interesting one on several levels. Some students seemed to be in agreement that neighborhoods could not be made up of people of different racial backgrounds. Their lived experience told them this was the case. At a very early age they had already become painfully aware of the sometimes hidden segregation that still seems to have a grasp on cities in the south, and perhaps across the nation. While students were not able to articulate the depth of the reasoning behind this segregation, they were nonetheless aware that it was occurring.

Reflections on human rights.

After reading *I Have the Right to be a Child* (Serres, 2012), several students were outraged that the United States never signed the treaty calling for addressing these human rights issues. I asked them to think about some ways we could try and fix this. We discussed ways to change things that we see as not being fair or right. Students determined they could talk to someone who could make that change. I asked them to consider who they could talk to about this issue. Several students responded emphatically, “Barack Obama!” We determined that our best course of action was to write a letter to the President of the United States. We spent the next several days crafting and constructing a letter through a shared writing process. Students submitted their ideas and other students helped in the writing of the letter. When we were done, we mailed the letter off to the White House in hopes of getting a response. I typed an additional letter explaining how we came about to writing this letter in order to provide additional context to the person who received it.

This was the first example of students responding to a problem through social action. It was moving to witness the power the students felt in their words and convictions. They believed they were doing something important, and they identified someone they believed could help

them. This was an important step into moving students to the center of the activist community of practice.

Reflections on fair and equal.

While I was walking around the room, I overheard an interesting conversation occurring between several students sitting at a table. We had just finished reading *Back of the Bus* and students were responding to the concepts of fairness and equality. I asked students to consider what makes something fair or unfair. One student found an interesting metaphor to make her point:

Student 1: Well, fair is not always equal. I mean it would be like equal for everyone to have to wear the same clothes as everyone else, but that wouldn't be fair. I don't want to have to dress like a boy. (Looks over at another student) Would you want to have to wear girl clothes?

Student 2: No! I'm not doing that!

Student: Right, because that wouldn't be fair, but it would be equal.

I was blown away by her analogy. In such simple terms, she had illustrated such a powerful point. It was at this moment that I knew that first graders were not only ready to engage in these critical conversations, they could articulate their points as well. This was one of those moments I felt good about the direction we were headed.

Final analysis of reflections.

At the conclusion of this first unit I still struggle with my own role in the classroom. I stick out like a sore thumb amongst my students. I am white. With the exception of two of them, they are not. I come from a middle-class background, both parents attended college, and I have

been afforded many privileges my students have not. In every sense, I am the very definition of oppressor.

I have seen such amazing growth from my students in their abilities to reflect on systems that play out in their own lives, but I sometimes still worry that I am imposing something onto them. Perhaps I am pushing my beliefs on them without realizing. Maybe all they are doing is parroting back what they hope I want to hear. If that is the case, then it would be safe to say I have failed, but I am not quite sure that is the case. I do think students are thinking differently, and I think I have succeeded as much as possible in keeping myself out of their thinking. I often have students looking at me, longing for my reassurance. When this happens I try to respond, “I don’t know the answer. I’m just asking the questions just like you.” It is tough to hold my ground but releasing this power has allowed my students to find new value in their thoughts and actions.

My greatest struggle has come from the school itself. I am the only one taking on this pedagogical shift. My school does not value such thinking. Like most “reform” oriented schools, we are focused on data collection and using quantifiable means of assessment to track student progress. The only thing that has kept the school off of my back is that my students are progressing at a rate much faster than others. I have not worried about this data, but in some ways it has been of a benefit to me. Because my students have performed well, the administration has left me alone. I wonder what would have happened had my students’ performance dropped. But, I believe that there must be something in my instruction that is causing students to outperform others. I would guess it has something to do with their comprehension of texts, but that is merely speculative.

The school shuffles children around multiple times in the day, asking that they be completely silent in the halls and in the cafeteria. I have a real problem with this approach, and I know it contradicts the work I am doing in my own classroom. I find myself having to play two roles, the teacher “in” the classroom and the teacher “out” of the classroom. I know my role reversals have to be seen as conflicting identities with my students, and this is difficult to reconcile with the things I ask of them in class. I have done my best to stay “true”, if you will, but it has proven to be difficult. While I see these great changes in my students, I have come to a terrible realization that I cannot continue to do this work in this same school setting. It pains me to admit, but this is not the place for me. I fear what will become of my students, but I hope that our work has given them a new sense of their abilities. And I hope that our classroom community has sparked in them a renewed sense of hope for themselves and who they are. I hope they feel confident in their identities. I hope they feel valued in their world. And most of all I hope they will carry that torch to whatever school or classroom they go. Yes, they are only in the first grade, but they are capable, courageous, and confident. I believe our work through this year will prepare them for whatever may come. I have planned our next unit to investigate works of fiction. I have titled it *Reconstructing Happily Ever After*. I look forward to sharing and critiquing some of my favorite counter narratives with students: *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, *Cinder Edna*, and *The Stinky Cheese Man* all look to provide some great discussions after the kind of talk I have seen thus far out of my students.

My initial question was to reflect on the nature of discourse in my own classroom and to see how this discourse was influenced or even hindered by my use of language and power. I saw early on that I clearly impacted how my students’ approached answering even my most critical questions. I talked too much and provided them little time to talk. I used words such as “good” or

“great idea” with some students and not with others. I positioned myself in the front of the room in a chair above my students. All of these factors may have influenced the types of talk my students generated because they all represented some sort of power dynamic that I had over them. It took time for me to realize how to adjust these things accordingly. Through this study I became much more cognizant of how I influenced student thinking.

Becoming a critical educator meant I had to confront these realities of the classroom discourse. Being critically aware opened up new opportunities for students to become constructors of their own meanings and interpretations. I saw students opening up more and sharing more, and I found myself saying less. As I became more critically aware, so did my students. As did their ability to develop their own narratives, tell their own stories, and share openly their own identities. I became a true believer in critical practices in the early grades.

Conclusion

The Common Core State Standards have changed the way many schools approach literacy. Early literacy, in particular, has seen several significant shifts in instructional focus. While many are worried about how these shifts will be approached in the day-to-day curriculum that students encounter, I take the stance that it also affords an opportunity to find spaces for new literacy. I am not alone in this thinking (Winograd, 2015).

Critical literacy provides a framework to support students in making more advanced jumps into reading and responding to texts. By positioning the reader as meaning maker, a critical literacy approach affords students the opportunity to engage authentically with texts and to develop a more thorough interpretation of text meaning by considering alternate viewpoints and deconstructing language use. The pedagogical decision to use a critical literacy framework

positions the teacher alongside the student in creating, developing, and critiquing multiple perspectives, analyzing text neutrality, and proposing additional action in response. This far exceeds the demands of the Common Core State Standards, in addition to sending a message to students that they are valued in the classroom discourse.

The read-aloud provides an opportunity to engage in authentic praxis (Freire, 1971), to bring the sociopolitical into the classroom (Lewison, et al, 2002), and to engage students in the reality of their world. When we do these things, we help to empower students to be the true meaning-makers. We take the power from our own hands and place it back into theirs. They are capable of great things when we truly believe in their ability to do such.

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