
20 Supporting Critical Conversations in Classrooms

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Contributing reviewers included Amy Breau, Jerome C. Harste, Christine Leland, Mitzi Lewison, Anne Ociepka, and Vivian Vasquez.

Critical conversations are important because they highlight diversity and difference while calling attention to the nature and role of literacy in our society. We have found that some books are particularly useful for starting and sustaining critical conversations in classrooms. These books provide the framework for a new kind of critical-literacy curriculum that focuses on building students' awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead. We are interested in studying the conversations that follow the reading of these books, and observing how children become new literate beings as a result of having participated in these conversations.

According to the definition developed by our review committee, books that can help to build a critical-literacy curriculum are those that meet one or more of the following criteria:

1. They don't make difference invisible, but rather explore what differences make a difference.
2. They enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who traditionally have been silenced or marginalized—those we call "the indignant ones."
3. They show how people can begin to take action on important social issues.
4. They explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people.
5. They help us question why certain groups are positioned as "others."

Some books in the critical-literacy category focus more on historical issues such as slavery or the industrial revolution and show how large groups of people were marginalized and stripped of their human

rights. Others are more contemporary in nature and encourage readers to interrogate current practices that are generally accepted because they are traditional or conventional in nature. For example, if a present-day high school uses a “slave day” theme to raise money for student activities, is it acceptable simply because it’s traditional, or do we need to consider that this practice might be seen as sustaining the degrading treatment of African Americans? Other critical-literacy books focus on the issue of “otherness,” and how our perceptions of people of different ethnic, cultural, or social groups can change after we get to know them better. Engaging children in conversations about the pernicious effects of otherness can help them begin to see and understand the world in new ways.

In primary classrooms, we have introduced critical-literacy books by reading them aloud. We note the key conversations that are generated by each book, and plan subsequent curricular activities that will help to extend these conversations over time. To foreground children’s thinking in regard to critical literacy issues, we select related artifacts to post on the classroom wall. Artifacts might be something as simple as a copy of a page in the book and key conversational interchanges between class members written on three-by-five-inch cards with arrows mapping the flow of conversation over time. The result is what we call an “audit trail” (Harste and Vasquez 1998), or what the three- and four-year-olds in Vivian Vasquez’ classroom called “the learning wall” (see Figure 1).

In upper-elementary and middle-school classrooms, we have used multiple copies of four or five critical adolescent novels to create text-sets that students self-select to read and discuss in groups. Members of each group work together to identify themes, after which the whole class comes together to share findings, artifacts, and insights that are then posted on a classroom wall.

Conceptually this approach is anchored in Luke and Freebody’s (1997) model of reading as social practice. Arguing that literacy is never neutral, Luke and Freebody lay out a grid showing four different constructions or views of literacy. They argue that historically, reading has been seen as decoding and the function of reading instruction was the development of children’s ability to break the code. During the 1970s and 1980s, psycholinguistic and schema-theoretical notions of reading emphasized reader-text interactions and drew attention to “text-meaning practices,” or more specifically, the development of a reader who understands how to use the textual and personal resources at hand to coproduce a meaningful reading. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, social-linguistic and social-semiotic theory focused our attention on language in use. During this period, reading was viewed in terms of what it did or could accomplish pragmatically in the real world. More recently,

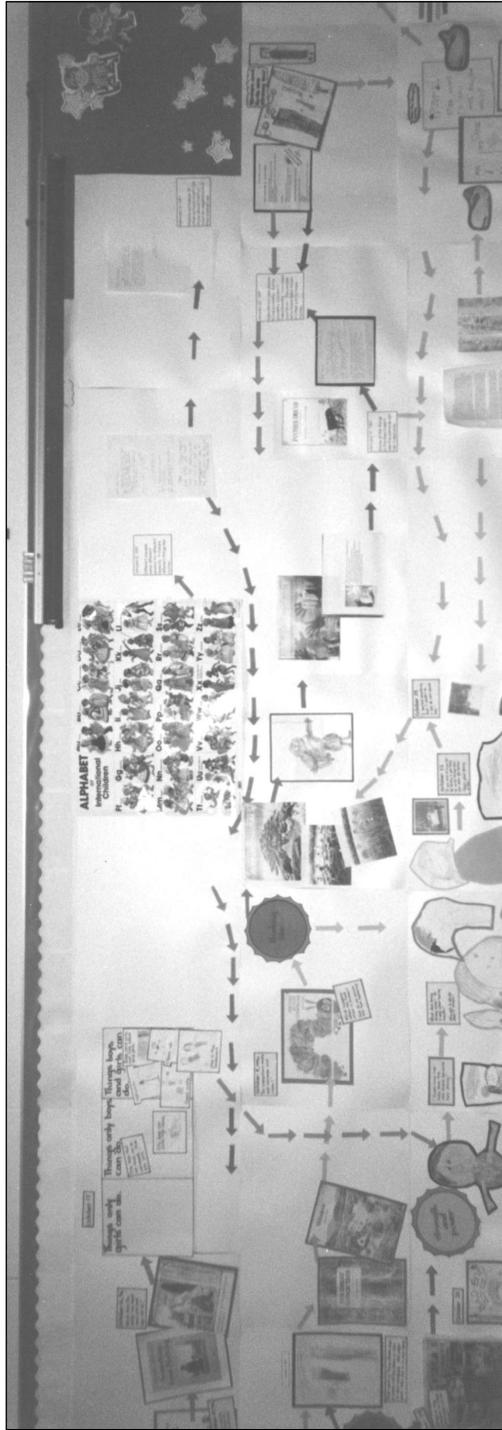


Figure 1. Photograph of Audit Trail in Vivian Vasquez' 3 & 4 year-old room.

Luke and Freebody have suggested that reading should be seen as a non-neutral form of cultural practice, one that positions readers and obliterates as much as it illuminates. Readers for the twenty-first century, they argue, need to be able to interrogate the assumptions that are embedded in a text, as well as the assumptions which they, as culturally indoctrinated beings, bring to the text. Questions such as “Whose story is this?” “Who benefits?” and “What voices are not being heard?” invite children to interrogate the systems of meaning that operate both consciously and unconsciously in a text as well as in society.

Although critical literacy involves critical thinking, it also entails more. Part of that “more” is social action built upon an understanding that literacy positions individuals and, in so doing, serves some more than others. As literate beings, it behooves us not only to know how to decode and make meaning, but also to understand how language works and to what ends, so that we can better see ourselves in light of the kind of world we wish to create and the kind of people we wish to become.

From several perspectives, then, the books we review in this chapter are of critical importance to educators. Although they invite specific conversations around specific topics, they function as a whole to create a curriculum that honors diversity and invites students and teachers alike to explore a new kind of literacy curriculum—one built upon the premise that a model of difference is a model of learning, for individuals as well as for society. One of the implicit arguments being tested by our use of these books in classrooms is that a diversity-and-difference model of education better serves a multilingual and multicultural society such as ours than does the conformity-and-consensus model of learning that currently permeates our educational system.

Given such possibilities, the book reviews that follow are somewhat different from the reviews that are included in other sections of this volume. Although we summarize the text, we also highlight potential conversations that the reading of these texts can make possible. In this way, teachers who wish to invite students to engage in particular conversations about events that have transpired in their community can easily locate texts that fit the bill. Others who have started particular conversations and wish to have them continue will find the thoroughness of our reviews useful as they identify themes and alternative perspectives on issues. Of necessity, therefore, the reviews in this chapter are longer than those found throughout the rest of *Adventuring with Books*.

To expedite organization and planning for teachers, the titles in this chapter were organized into the following five sections, which correspond to the five criteria for critical literacy books discussed above: Understanding Differences that Make a Difference; Giving Voice to the

Indignant Ones; Taking Social Action; Understanding How Systems of Meaning in Society Position Us; and Examining Distance, Difference, and "Otherness." A sixth section entitled Other Ideas for Text-Sets includes three categories of books that teachers might find helpful for putting together additional text-sets. The first category focuses on Child Labor and Children's Rights, and includes books that address these issues from both historical and contemporary perspectives. This text-set provides a wide lens for seeing how working children in a variety of national and international settings have been, and continue to be, marginalized and exploited. The second category, Literacy as Power, pulls together books that demonstrate the power of literacy to allow new voices to be heard. Characters in these books discover how their acquisition or use of literacy allows them to write a new identity, or to interact with others in powerful new ways. The third category is called Multiple Perspectives. Books in this group rely on the use of several different characters to tell the story. Seen through the eyes of these different people, the same events look very different and far more complex than they did at first glance. By highlighting these discrepancies in perception, teachers might find this text-set useful for beginning philosophical conversations about the nature of reality and how our backgrounds and beliefs influence what we see.

Our committee designated as Primary books those that we thought had the most potential for generating the kinds of critical conversations that we want our students to experience. Books designated as Secondary are worthy of consideration, but are not as outstanding as those in the Primary sections. For example, we found that some of these books were not as obviously critical in their approach. Although critical issues and possibilities were present, too much was left unsaid and too much had to be dug out before the critical implications of the book could be realized. In other cases, our committee felt the books were more valuable as references or resource materials for supporting critical conversations rather than as vehicles for beginning them. Finally some of these books we considered too sophisticated for most elementary and middle-school readers.

Arthur Applebee (1997) found that the best teachers thought about curriculum in terms of what conversations they wanted their students to be engaged in, not in terms of what concepts they wanted to introduce through reading or through direct instruction. Concepts, he argues, will come as learners engage in conversations that keep them at the forefront of the discipline they are studying and the world in which they are living. Although many of the books we reviewed can be seen as controversial, they reflect life in a way that most school curricula do not.

It is this relevancy and the potential to explore new curricular possibilities that make this chapter, the books we reviewed, and the topic of critical literacy itself conversations we simply can't afford not to have.

Works Cited

- Applebee, Arthur N. 1997. Rethinking Curriculum in the English Language Arts. *English Journal* 86, no. 3: 25–31.
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Zwiers and Crawford, authors of *Academic Conversations: Classroom Talk that Fosters Critical Thinking and Content Understandings*, define quality conversation as transactional, collaborative, and growing. In other words, academic conversation is all about idea-exchanges between people who are working to co-create new knowledge and meaning. As English teachers, we regularly provide opportunities for students to engage in classroom conversation about a specific topic, to share insight with each other, to answer a question, to debrief or brainstorm, etc. As new teachers, we were told that students should “think-pair-share” and that literature circles are a great way to give students choice.