Critical literacy: A questioning stance and the possibility for change

As a parent and a researcher, the author explores the place of critical literacy in children's literature.

Megan loved to turn the pages while her mom read bedtime stories, and it was fun to talk about the books when they were done. She was 6 years old and could read by herself, but sometimes it was nice to just look at the pretty pictures and listen to the story. This was the first time they had read “Beauty and the Beast,” and Megan was excited to tell her mom about her favorite parts.

“I liked how nice Beauty was to everybody but I liked the end the best,” said Megan.

“Why?” asked her mom.

“Well, 'cause they get to live happily ever after, just like Cinderella and Snow White and everybody like that,” explained Megan.

“Oh...” Her mom thought about her own childhood belief that “someday her prince would come.” When had she outgrown it? Too late, unfortunately. As a single parent, she didn't want Megan to grow up with the same fantasies and expectations about relationships. She asked Megan, “Do you think it's like that in real life?”

“Yeah! Remember Aunt Sarah’s wedding to Uncle Eric? She had the really pretty white dress and I got to carry the flowers for her!”

“Do you think Aunt Sarah is like Beauty or Cinderella?”

“No, but it's kinda the same because she gets to live happily ever after.”

Megan’s mother hoped that her brother and sister-in-law would have a successful marriage, but she knew it would take a lot of hard work. Sarah had grown up hearing the same fairy tales, and both women’s beliefs about relationships had been shaped in part by these stories, especially the notion that one of the most important goals in a young woman’s life should be the attainment of a modern-day Prince Charming.

Megan’s mother wondered whether she should stop reading fairy tales, but she knew that Megan would encounter these stories in other ways. What would be an alternative to censorship of her daughter’s reading materials?

One solution to this dilemma is critical literacy, which encourages readers to adopt a questioning stance and to work toward changing themselves and their worlds. This article presents critical literacy as an approach to teaching (and parenting) children that goes beyond critical thinking skills. First, I discuss contemporary education, with an emphasis on literacy, in terms of its socializing effect on children. Second, I explain critical literacy theory, stressing the crucial concept that it is an overall philosophy rather than a set of techniques. Third, I address attitudes toward teaching and ways in which educators and parents can incorporate critical literacy. Fourth, I present examples of books that can be used to support critical literacy, as well as a discussion of the need to enhance the availability of critical literacy models. Fifth, I offer some limitations and considerations about a questioning, critical stance and a desire for transformation.

Contemporary education

Many people who question or challenge traditional schooling argue that educational institutions socialize children into the dominant ideology. Shannon (1995) pointed out that “[U.S.] schools in general and literacy programs in particular are often organized to promote a specific set of values—normal American values” (p. 15). Typically, reading is treated as a solitary activity (Bottigheimer, 1998; Luke & Freebody, 1997), with an emphasis on “learning to read,” not “reading to learn” (Cadierno-Kaplan & Smith, 2002), and focusing on New
Critical, text-based approaches to reading (McGinley et al., 1997). Such practices prompt students to search for the “correct” answers and interpretations of a text, as defined by the teacher or curriculum guide, instilling in children a habit of privileging institutional beliefs and devaluing their own reactions and opinions (Apol, 1998).

Stephens (1992) argued that educators tend to prefer books for children that are “based on a true story” over literature that is purely “fictional.” Despite the imaginary elements of nonfiction books, educators often perceive and teach texts that depict “the real world” as examples of truth. Similarly, teachers typically encourage children to identify with principal characters in stories. According to Stephens, “a mode of reading which locates the reader only within the text is disabling, and leaves readers susceptible to gross forms of intellectual manipulation” (p. 4). Likewise, research indicates that texts greatly influence young readers (Creighton, 1997). This appears to be a widespread notion because concerned parents and educators often feel compelled to scrutinize children’s reading material. Rather than expose children to “sensitive” or potentially disturbing images and situations, well-intentioned adults generally practice censorship in an effort to shelter children from harsh realities (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998). Ironically, although adults are aware of the “inappropriate” images that children are exposed to through television and within their communities, there tends to be a “tradition among elementary teachers of protecting the ‘innocence of childhood’ by keeping complex, unpleasant (but commonplace) issues out of the classroom” (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000, p. 14). Such practices “maintain schools as unauthentic spaces that are part of a ‘Dick-and-Jane’ world,” creating an environment that is “disconnected from children’s everyday experiences and makes classrooms appear to be places where one cannot engage in anything real or important” (p. 14).

The old Dick-and-Jane books presented a sanitized, idealized world, which no longer represents most children’s realities. But despite increased sensitivity to diversity, contemporary texts are not neutral. Apol (1998) explained that “adults mediate most, if not all, of a child’s reading, and that mediation is not disinterested; it is a way for adults to shape children, to promote for children a certain version of reality” (p. 45). In addition to prescribing how children should read, adults decide what should (and should not) be read. “Texts are not simply ‘delivery systems’ of ‘facts,’” wrote Apple (1992); “they are the simultaneous results of political, economic, and cultural activities, battles, and compromises” (p. 4). Acceptable children’s literature presents “appropriate behavior” (Boutte, 2002), and most published authors depict the world as they think it should be (Bottigheimer, 1998). Just as “Beauty and the Beast” and other fairy tales encourage young women to be “nice” and “obedient,” many contemporary texts continue to reinforce the status quo.

In general, children in the United States are taught to not question the status quo and to accept and obey the voice of authority. Such indoctrination in passivity is compounded by the fact that stories can shape the ways in which children perceive themselves and their world (Kohl, 1995; McGinley et al., 1997). Children learn at an early age that certain subjects, such as sex or homelessness, are uncomfortable for adults and therefore off-limits. Evans, Avery, and Pederson (1999) investigated the topics considered suitable for social studies courses and discovered that there is “a system of taboo and noa [safe] topics” that guides text selection (p. 222). They argued that the “closer to students’ lives, the more meaningful, the more likely the topic is to be taboo” (p. 221). Hence, ideas that adults deem disturbing or forbidden are typically avoided, despite children’s possible desire to learn more about them. Ironically, such taboo topics pervade mainstream media. In Kohl’s (1995) discussion of the implicit prejudice and capitalism in the Babar series by Jean de Brunhoff, he wrote,

> There is no way to avoid having your children exposed to many objectionable or problematic aspects of our culture. Guns and Barbies, and Babar too, are part of cultural life in the United States, and children have to develop critical attitudes toward them. These attitudes will not develop through prohibition. (p. 15)

By developing critical perspectives toward texts, students can transfer these skills to the larger society, thereby “reading” their world through a critical stance that leads to empowerment.

**Critical literacy**

Critical literacy is rooted in the work of Freire, whose call for radical pedagogical change
advocated for a sweeping transformation in ways of thinking rather than specific teaching strategies or techniques. Because we tend to associate the word *radical* with images of rebellious extremists, it is worthwhile to consider a key definition, which is "of or from the root or roots; going to the foundation or source of something; fundamental; basic" (Neufeldt & Guralnik, 1991, p. 1107). In the seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2000), Freire explained that exploited people do not necessarily recognize their own oppression. He wrote, "as long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically 'accept' their exploitation" (p. 64). Additionally, the oppressed "prefer the security of conformity with their state of unfreedom to the creative communion produced by freedom and even the very pursuit of freedom" (p. 48). The solution, according to Freire, is a liberating education implemented by the oppressed in which the roles of teacher and student are redefined—teachers learn and learners teach. Contrary to conventional models, students' ideas and experiences would be respected as valuable knowledge. Instead of treating students as passive receptacles of information, teachers would encourage students to question their worlds, focusing on the use of authentic dialogue, in which educators speak *with*, not *for*, the students. Freire advocated for a praxis entailing "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). It is important to recognize that Freire's theories should be viewed in terms of a philosophy rather than as a set of methods or techniques. He believed that these ideas would need to be "reinvented" for each person's or group's particular context. Likewise, Freire emphasized the need for hope—an optimistic attitude rooted in a sense of possibility that would stimulate and support work toward improvement and transformation.

Current theorists sometimes place critical literacy on a continuum in terms of other literacy movements. For instance, Cadierno-Kaplan and Smith (2002) explained that functional literacy refers to the basic ability to read and write well enough to understand signs, ads, and newspaper headlines; to make shopping lists; to write checks; and to fill out job applications. Cultural literacy denotes knowledge of the canon, or "great books," with emphasis on the teaching of morals and values, without regard for individual and community experiences. Progressive literacy, a liberal ideology focused on the student, "fails to examine questions of cultural and political context. Such practices, while designed to empower, are not transformative because they ignore students' cultural capital" (p. 376–377). Regarding empowerment, Freire would argue that it does not come *from* the educator *to* the student, or *from* the adult *to* the child. Rather, the educator or adult provides the skills that will hopefully lead to the development of a sense of agency, self-sufficiency, and confident decision making. Similarly, Luke and Freebody (1997) pointed out that "traditional, skills-based, psychological, and progressivist approaches to reading have more in common with one another than might first appear and certainly than is evident from the perennial debates among their advocates" (p. 222).

There are a variety of definitions of critical literacy. Shannon (1995) offered a concise, understandable explanation.

Critical perspectives push the definition of literacy beyond traditional decoding or encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of text or society until it becomes a means for understanding one's own history and culture, to recognize connections between one's life and the social structure, to believe that change in one's life, and the lives of others and society are possible as well as desirable, and to act on this new knowledge in order to foster equal and just participation in all the decisions that affect and control our lives. (p. 83)

Critical literacy transcends conventional notions of reading and writing to incorporate critical thinking, questioning, and transformation of self or one's world. Additionally, definitions of critical literacy usually consider "text" to be anything that can be "read," which leads to infinite possibilities. Some would argue that a T-shirt, graffiti, a cereal box, or a rock all can be "read" as texts. Essentially, a person can "read," interpret, question, and "rewrite" almost any aspect of his or her world.

The idea of transforming oneself and one's world through language is also rooted in Freirean theory. Freire believed that non-elite people need to master the dominant language. Students need to gain fluency in the dominant discourse, but it is important that they understand the underlying ethical and historical context of standard English and academic discourse (Shor, 1999). According to Shor, "by themselves, correct usage, paragraph skills, rhetorical forms like narrative, description,
or cause and effect, are certainly not foundations for democratic or critical consciousness” (Shor, 1999, Critical Literacy for Envisioning Change section, ¶ 5). In addition to the influence of Freire, critical literacy has foundations in the sociocultural theory of language, challenging readers to think about the relationship between language and power (Gee, 1996). Readers are encouraged to question the underlying ideologies of discourses and everyday life, asking questions such as “Why are things the way they are?” and “Who benefits from the status quo?” Furthermore, it is important to recognize that critical thinking skills are only a component of critical literacy—readers are encouraged to uncover implicit messages in texts and to examine all aspects of discourse.

But there is more. Perhaps the most unusual element of critical literacy is social action stemming from readers’ increasing understanding that literacy and who gets to be literate are related to issues of equity and power. Once we become aware of injustice, it is our duty as citizens to work toward change. In contrast to educational practice in the United States, teachers in Australia generally present texts to students with an emphasis on their underlying power-laden qualities, encouraging critical reading and analysis in the classroom (Luke, 2000; Morgan, 1997). Nevertheless, Luke (2000) suggested that this widespread practice may be “just a watered down version of educational progressivism” (p. 449) rather than true critical literacy, mainly because it has become institutionalized. More important, the transformational component is lacking, and Morgan asserted that “It would be naïve to expect that the state would endorse a pedagogy which proclaims its intention to undermine the economic status quo and the legitimacy of the present practice of government” (1997, p. 24).

Understandably, educators may be intimidated by official policies (Westheimer & Kahlen, 1998) or feel paralyzed by imagined constraints (Meyerson, 2001) despite their desires to promote social change.

Giroux (1993) explained that critical literacy points to pedagogical practices which offer students the knowledge, skills, and values they will need to critically negotiate and transform the world in which they find themselves. The politics of critical literacy and cultural difference engages rather than retreats from those problems that make democracy messy, vibrant, and noisy. (p. 376)

“Messy, vibrant, and noisy” classrooms are perceived by many as out of control and undesirable. The idealized or “Dick-and-Jane” model of schooling depicts well-behaved children engaging in orderly, matter-of-fact, and quiet activities. Which environment contributes to students’ capacity to participate actively and authentically in a democracy?

Teaching

Giroux (1993) pointed out the socializing aspects of education, asserting that teachers produce knowledge and they provide students with a sense of place, worth, and identity. In doing so, they offer students selected representations, skills, social relations, and values that presuppose particular histories and ways of being in the world. The moral and political dimension at work here is revealed in the question: Whose history, story, and experience prevails in the school setting? (p. 372-373)

In order to practice critical literacy, teachers need to be reflective and aware of their beliefs about the world. More important, teachers need to be honest with themselves and realize that an approach to critical literacy will be inauthentic, ineffective, and thereby futile if they do not truly embrace its philosophical underpinnings.

We must also recognize the ways in which our ideologies influence our own reading and teaching of texts. We may adopt or reject texts based on how closely the authors’ worldviews seem to align with our own. Apol (1998) explained that

the starting point for helping students to be critical readers is for teachers themselves to be critical readers, able to immerse themselves in the experience of literature while at the same time distancing themselves in order to recognize and evaluate the values and hidden messages implicit in the text. (p. 36-37)

Apol also argued that teachers should have a basic understanding of literary theory.

Apol (1998) recommended the negotiation of a “tricky balance between theory and practice” (p. 32), to integrate the content and methods of English departments with the concepts and strategies of colleges of education. Literary theory, which Apol
defined as a questioning critical stance, can help readers (of all ages) to determine the ideology—the cultural assumptions and unexamined messages—contained in a text. She wrote, “Contemporary theories, I believe, allow us to imagine more—to consider the reader’s response as a starting point, the beginning of a conversation between reader and text rather than the end” (p. 33). It is not necessary to teach readers specific theories (e.g., deconstruction, structuralism, feminist theory, Marxist criticism); rather, teachers can construct questions that encourage multiple readings and careful examination of texts (Apol, 1998).

Returning to the example of “Beauty and the Beast,” a reader could consult the work of Tatar (1998) to learn more about the historical context of the story. Madame Leprince de Beaumont’s 1756 version of the story was expressly intended to educate young women, encouraging them to adopt the ideal virtues of the time period. Her tale “endorses the importance of obedience and self-denial,” as Beauty sacrifices herself to save her father (Tatar, p. 27). Clearly, the rewards are great for obedient, submissive, and humble young women, as Beauty’s kindness and love transform Beast into a handsome, marriageable prince. This information adds another dimension to the story, providing readers with the opportunity to think critically about the underlying messages. Nevertheless, children may be more familiar with the Disney animated adaptation of this tale than the written version. Although Disney’s portrayal of the heroine Belle is updated and somewhat more liberated, a “critical viewing” (Semali, 1999) reveals that “In the end, Belle simply becomes another woman whose life is valued for solving a man’s problems” (Giroux, 1999, p. 101). Many proponents of critical literacy believe that young children can be taught to read texts and their worlds critically (Apol, 1998; Boutte, 2002; Creighton, 1997; Shannon, 1995).

When Megan was 8 years old, she watched Disney’s movie version of Beauty and the Beast. As usual, she was eager to discuss it with her mother.

“It’s a lot different from the book,” said Megan.

“How?” asked her mother.

“Well, you know when we were talking about Cinderella and Snow White and Sleeping Beauty and how they’re always beautiful and they get rich and live happily ever after and stuff like that?”

“Yes,” said her mother. “And you noticed that none of those stories have homeless people, and I pointed out that all of the people had white skin.”

“Yeah,” said Megan. “It’s the same way in Beauty and the Beast. I wonder how [my friends] Esmerelda and Ashaki feel when they see stuff like that.”

“Maybe we can ask them,” suggested her mother.

Regarding the teaching of critical literacy, as mentioned earlier, the notion that one adopts a philosophy and attitude toward texts rather than delivers a set of activities cannot be stressed enough. Harste (2000) discussed how to be with students: “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” (p. 511). Comber (2001) explained how to work with students: “The task for teachers is to help children to develop a meta-awareness and a meta-language for what they already know how to do and to assist them in applying these resources to the texts and situations of school life” (Comber, p. 2).

Comber also pointed out that critical literacy does not have to be boring or negative. Apol (1998) suggested some questions that can be used with young children.

- Questions about how characters and situations are portrayed: “Who do you like in the story?” “Who is always in the background in this story?” “Which people don’t you hear in the story, and what might they say if you heard them?”

- Questions about how information is presented: “Are there other ways to show this person/place/event?”

- Questions about how texts are probably intended to be read: “What do you think the writer wants readers to think?”

- Questions about how they as readers respond to the text: “What did you notice about this story?” “How does this make you feel?”

Additionally, Kohl (1995) offered some questions in his discussion of the Babar series (p. 5). These questions can be modified and applied to many different children’s texts:

- “Who has the power in Babar?”
• “Who makes the decisions in the story?”
• “Who is obeyed and tells the other characters what to do?”
• “How is power distributed among the characters in the text?”

“Beauty and the Beast” can also be used to illustrate critical literacy, as we consider a few of these questions when thinking about the story. For example, regarding power, a child might decide that Beast and Beauty’s father have all the power in the story because these men get to make the decisions. When Beauty’s father is imprisoned for picking the rose, Beast offers only one option: The father can be traded for one of his daughters. Beauty’s father barely protests when she willingly sacrifices herself for him. Will young children be adversely affected by these messages after reading “Beauty and the Beast”? Probably not. But continual exposure to such texts without the benefit of critical questioning and discussion could indoctrinate readers into the ideology of the story.

Examples of books

Should we throw away our favorite books, or as Kohl (1995) asked, “Should we burn Babar?” Just the opposite is true. We can use texts as tools to help children discover underlying ideologies. “The intent should not be to avoid books because of their ideological stances,” wrote Boutte (2002), “but rather to become aware of the ideologies, be critical consumers of books, and teach children to think about what they are reading and hearing” (p. 151). For instance, Lamme and Fu (2001) discussed the ways in which an informational picture book provides readers with a romanticized impression of rice farmers in Bali, and they offered suggestions for deeper, more accurate understanding (Meek, 1995). With help from adults, children can learn to become critical readers of the multiple texts that inundate their daily lives, including music, television, videos, advertisements, and other media (Giroux, 1999; Semali, 1999; Shannon, 1995).

Additionally, we can select texts that explicitly support critical literacy in a variety of ways. Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, and Vasquez (1999) and Harste (2000) suggested selecting books that have one or more of the following characteristics:

• 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 traditionally have been silenced or marginalized—those we call the “indignant ones.”
• 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—helping us question why certain groups are positioned as “others.”
• They don’t provide “happily ever after” endings for complex social problems.

Boutte (2002) stated,

Books depicting multiple and contradictory perspectives should be included (e.g., include both positive and non-favorable characters from the same gender, ethnicity, religion, class). The goal is to avoid simplistic dichotomies of “good” and “bad” and monolithic depictions of any culture, race, gender, religion, or class. (p. 149)

She also pointed out the fact that “no one book will provide a complete view or comprehensive coverage of an issue” (p. 151).

I have found quite a few books for upper elementary, middle school, and high school students that meet some of these criteria. However, there are fewer texts that stand alone—without requiring explanation from adults—showing characters “reading” their worlds critically, questioning reality, transforming themselves, and initiating social change. The intended audience for picture books, approximately 4 to 8 years old, is especially impressionable and would benefit from literature that supports critical literacy. The following books might be useful:

• The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs written by Jon Scieszka and illustrated by Lane Smith (1989). This delightful book for all ages recounts the well-known tale of the three little pigs from the Big Bad Wolf’s perspective.
Claiming that “nobody has ever heard my side of the story,” Alexander T. Wolf explains that the “real story is about a sneeze and a cup of sugar.” The text invites multiple readings, as the audience realizes in the end that the story is being told from a prison cell. How reliable is a jailed wolf? Yet his story could be true because he has an explanation for everything. Additionally, the wolf blames the media for skewing the facts. The book is lighthearted and fun, but it makes some valuable points about alternate perspectives.

• *Seven Blind Mice* by Ed Young (1992). This book relies on striking illustrations to convey much of the meaning as it retells the ancient fable of the Blind Men and the Elephant. The first six mice each inspect one aspect of the elephant and report to the rest what they have found—always an object that corresponds to their own color (a red pillar, a green snake, a yellow spear, a purple cliff, an orange fan, and a blue rope). The seventh mouse (the only female) takes her time to investigate and discovers that the Something is an elephant. The last page states: “The Mouse Moral: Knowing in part may make a fine tale, but wisdom comes from seeing the whole.” Children will enjoy rereading the book, knowing the truth that the mice have yet to discover.

*The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* and *Seven Blind Mice* invite readers to think about multiple perspectives. Despite the explicit morals, children can see how a variety of perspectives may contribute to more accurate understanding.

Lewison et al. (2000) addressed the genre of “multi-view” social issues books. They describe multiview books as showing “one’s identity as social, being built from the viewpoints of others and interactions with them...or show the self as multilayered, fragmented, and fluid” (p. 10). Social issues books focus on building students’ awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead. The books invite conversations about fairness and justice; they encourage children to ask why some groups of people are positioned as “others.” Another common characteristic of social issues books is that they do not have “they lived happily ever after” endings. (p. 10)

Multiview social issues books are difficult to find, especially for younger children, but Anthony Browne’s *Voices in the Park* (1998) is exemplary. This text presents four perspectives of the same incident through the narrations of a wealthy mother, her lonesome son Charles, an out-of-work father, and his bubbly daughter Smudge. Through their voices (a different font is used for each person), readers become aware of each character’s attitude toward others and separate understandings of the visit to the park. The mother describes telling Charles to “sit” on the bench, but, after he disappears, she finds him “talking to a very rough-looking child” (Smudge) and insists that they must go home. Then Smudge’s glum father tells about arriving at the park, looking through the newspaper for a job, and leaving with his cheerful daughter. Next, Charles recounts meeting Smudge near the slide, saying “It was a girl, unfortunately, but I went anyway.” They become friends, and he ends with, “Maybe Smudge will be there next time?” Finally, Smudge describes meeting Charles (“I thought he was kind of a wimp at first”) and playing with him. The illustrations complement the words and reflect the personalities of each speaker. This text brings up issues such as gender, class, and prejudice in a skillful, enjoyable manner. Readers are presented with multiple perspectives and they can decide for themselves (or with adult assistance) which voices seem most credible.

**A critical suggestion**

Teachers and parents can channel children’s responses to texts in critical ways, and they can encourage opportunities for transformation and action. For example, Shannon (1995) discussed how his own children’s natural curiosity while watching a movie prompted important questions. Together, the family engaged in dialogue about various aspects of the film, leading them to search for clarification and information from multiple sources, consequently deciding to act upon their new knowledge. In a more traditional educational setting, high school English teacher Erin Gruwell was shocked to discover that most of her “unteachable, at-risk” teenagers had never heard of the Holocaust (Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell, 1999). Gruwell used the opportunity to introduce
texts about tolerance, encouraging students to ask questions and participate in dialogue through diary entries. Through these experiences, the teacher and students transformed themselves as well as their worlds in significant ways.

Children need guidance from adults to make sense of their experiences, but according to Greene (1998), "It cannot be taken for granted that everyone will notice instances of injustice nor recognize it for what it is" (p. xxx). Therefore, children could benefit from texts that actually depict characters engaging in critical literacy—characters "reading" their worlds critically, questioning reality, transforming themselves, and initiating social change. Kohl (1995) argued that "there is still an almost total absence of books, fiction or nonfiction, that question the economic and social structure of our society and the values of capitalism" (p. 59). He suggested that authors and publishers produce "radical" stories ("radical" in the sense of fundamental change, as mentioned previously), which would incorporate the following characteristics:

- The major force in the story is the community or some natural social group larger than the family; it involves a group working toward unity and focusing on solving a problem of inequity.
- The situation of conflict is one involving a whole community, class, ethnic group, nation, or even the world—there is an attempt to improve the world and create a new order of living.
- Collective action is involved, ranging from passive nonviolence to confrontation, and from electoral politics to escape and the establishment of a new community based on principles of equity.
- There exists an enemy who has abused power and who is nevertheless a three-dimensional person or group of people, not an abstract force or mysterious and unknowable entity. The story illustrates comradeship as well as friendship and love.
- There is no compulsory happy ending or resolution of the problem in radical stories.
- Radical tales should nurture the social imagination and at the same time not be dogmatic or preachy.

Kohl explained that "what characterizes all the [radical] stories...is a projection of hope and possibility" (p. 66–68). Examples of texts that illustrate some of Kohl’s suggestions include *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* (Cronin, 2000), in which the cows use a typewriter (hence, "click, clack, moo") to protest their poor working environment, and the farmer eventually accedes to their demands. Additionally, in *Sitti’s Secrets* (Nye, 1994), a young American girl describes a visit to her grandmother in a Palestinian village on the West Bank. Upon her return home, the girl decides to act upon her new knowledge by writing a letter to the president of the United States in which she communicates concern for her grandmother and the people "on the other side of the world" and expresses her hope for peace.

As with many texts, picture books contain multiple layers of meaning, so a reader’s interpretation will depend on his or her experiences as well as intellectual and emotional development. Accordingly, picture books addressing social issues, such as *Click, Clack, Moo* and *Sitti’s Secrets*, can be understood on multiple levels. When reading *Click, Clack, Moo*, children may simply recognize that farm animals get what they want, whereas other readers may perceive a more complex message about labor struggles. Likewise, an explicit theme of *Sitti’s Secrets* concerns common bonds that transcend language, cultural, and national barriers, but readers may also detect an implicit message regarding difference and conflict between the United States and the Middle East. In addition to readers’ developmental levels, their understandings of texts will be influenced by the amount and type of scaffolding or support strategies they receive from adults.

**Limitations**

In an ideal world, adults would model and promote critical literacy, encouraging children to question texts and their worlds, engage in dialogue, and work toward transformation. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, many theorists agree that Freire would not want educators to focus solely on a critical stance to literacy without teaching the dominant discourse. Cadiero-Kaplan and Smith (2002) wrote,
While it is important to stress whole language processes, methods of engaging students’ lives and text critically, and the use of dialogue and reflection, we must be cognizant to also teach students to be successful in the skills and strategies required on school-mandated tests and standards-based outcomes. (p. 380)

The fairness of high-stakes tests is not addressed in the scope of this article, but Cadiero-Kaplan and Smith’s statement is worth considering due to the current state of education.

Despite my trust in critical literacy as a necessary educational philosophy, it would be naive to expect sudden or massive change (Evans et al., 1999). There are excellent examples of teachers and parents successfully engaging in critical literacy with children (Morgan, 1997; Shannon, 1995). Yet such a critical stance is dangerous—for educators and children. Teachers often face rejection and ostracism when they criticize the “system,” as well as disapproval from parents for “subversive” teaching that uses inappropriate texts or undermines adult authority (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998), despite the fact that children can be taught to question and discuss in a respectful manner. However, ignoring critical literacy limits children’s potential to become thoughtful, active citizens in a democracy, who can work toward transformation (Giroux, 1993; Shannon, 1995). Shannon suggested that social injustices persist in our society because people do not “ask why things are the way they are, who benefits from these conditions, and how can we make them more equitable” (p. 123). People may resist critical literacy because it disrupts the status quo—especially when adults speak with instead of for children. It involves relinquishing power as a knowledgeable authority and adopting a sense of openness and possibility.

Megan is crying. “It’s just so sad! Do you think it was really that bad?” Before her mother can respond, Megan says, “Yeah. Not much has changed, has it?” They will continue discussing this book and its implications over the next few months; and they will never forget its impact.

Although the focus of this discussion has been on teachers, I hope this article has also shown that nearly all aspects of critical literacy can be successfully adopted by parents. Megan, of course, is my daughter.

McDaniel is a doctoral candidate and writing instructor at San Diego State University in California. She may be contacted by e-mail at mcDaniel@Mail.sdsu.edu.

References


