



Parent Education Event Winter, 2015

*Critical Literacy: Choosing and Talking About Books
with an Eye Toward Social Justice*

Co-Facilitated by
Ginny Spivey, Director of Teaching and Learning and
Lindsay Hershenhorn, Lower School Literacy Specialist

Key Understandings

We cannot avoid stereotypes and bias in books, but we CAN mediate the understandings our kids construct if we adopt a critical stance. As parents and educators it is important to:

- 1) Teach our kids to be in conversation with books and to unpack and talk back to the messages they contain.
- 2) Read ALL kinds of books with our kids so that they see both themselves and the world reflected back.

Strategies for Talking Back to Books

You might begin with open-ended questions:

What did you think of this book?

What's on your mind after hearing this story?

Has something like this ever happened to you?

How does the information in this book fit with what you know or your experience?

You might continue with some of these questions:

Are there other ways to tell this story?

Are there other ways to tell this event?

Are there other ways to show this person?

What might this character say if she/he were telling the story?

Who has the power in this story?

What if (a different character/group) had the power?

What do you think the author wants you to think?

What do you think?

How does this make you feel?

What if ...

With younger children, you might just model this kind of thinking by thinking aloud talking back to the book yourself! That might sound something like this...

If I were going to tell this story I would ...

If I were going to write a story about ... I might ...

If I were (character) I might be thinking/feeling...

What does the author mean by that?! I think...

That doesn't fit with what I know... I think

Strategies for Choosing Books with an Eye Toward Social Justice

Consider the books you read broadly, as a collection, and ask these questions:

- Do the stories offer my child a variety of things to think about, question, and consider?
- Do the stories reflect a variety of settings, perspectives, and experiences?
- Do the stories allow my child to consider multiple perspectives and values?
- Do the characters represent people from a variety of cultural groups?
- Does the representation of those groups include significant specific cultural information or does it follow stereotypes?
- Is difference and diversity incidental and/or always central to the story?
- Do "good" and strong characters reflect a variety of backgrounds?
- Are females as well as males depicted in leadership roles?

Consider individual books that represent a culture, identity, or experience that is not your own by asking these questions*:

- Are characters "outside the mainstream culture" depicted as individuals or as caricatures?
- Does their representation include significant specific cultural information? Or does it follow stereotypes?
- Who has the power in the story? What is the nature of their power, and how do they use it?
- Who has wisdom? What is the nature of their wisdom, and how do they use it?
- What are the consequences of certain behaviors? What behaviors or traits are rewarded, and how? What behaviors are punished, and how?
- How is language used to create images of people of a particular group? How are artistic elements used to create those images?
- Who has written this story? Who has illustrated it? Are they inside or outside the groups/experience they are representing? What are they in a position to know? What do they claim to know?
- Whose voices are heard? Whose are missing?
- What do this narrative and these pictures say about race? class? culture? gender? age? resistance to the status quo?

Questions adapted from, Mendoza, J., & Reese, D. (2001). Examining Multicultural Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom: Possibilities and Pitfalls. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 3(2), n2.

Some additional criteria for identifying books that promote critical literacy*

- The text calls attention to disparities or imbalances that are traditionally depicted as the “the norm”, such as differences in social class or race.
- The reader has the opportunity to “hear” the voice of someone else who has typically been positioned as “other” in terms of ethnicity, social class, gender, etc.
- Social action, a key component of critical literacy, is modeled in such a way that readers can see individuals working to effect change.
- Some of the assumptions and ideologies upon which many aspects of our society function are exposed, encourage readers to question the status quo and the meaning of normal.
- Encouraging the reader to think about why some people’s voices typically are not heard.
- Although the conclusion may be upbeat, some problems may be depicted as too entrenched for immediate transformation, and difficult issues are not resolved unrealistically with quick fixes.
- They depict multiple (sometimes contradictory) perspectives, through techniques such as providing more than one narrator or offering the voices of many characters.

*adapted from McDaniel, C. A. (2006). *Critical literacy: A way of thinking, a way of life* (Vol. 296). Peter Lang.

Resources for Finding Diverse Books

We Need Diverse Books

<http://weneeddiversebooks.org>

We Need Diverse Books™ is a grassroots organization of children's book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people. You can find links to various book awards and online resources devoted to representing a diversity of groups and a broad range of cultural experiences under the resources tab.

Notable Books for a Global Society

<http://clrsig.org/nbgs.php>

Each year a committee of the International Reading Association selects 25 outstanding trade books for enhancing student understanding of people and cultures throughout the world. The annual book lists can be found on their website.

An Inspirational Quote

From the authors of Teaching Children's Literature: It's Critical!

Rather than take what they read or hear at face value, today's citizens need to be able to unpack texts in order to understand and challenge the systems of meaning that are operating to position them in ways they may not wish to be positioned. Our central goal is to create a critically thoughtful citizenry.

*Leland, C., Lewison, M., & Harste, J. (2012). Teaching children's literature: it's critical!. Routledge.