Chapter 6

Encouraging Critical Literacy:
Justice and Equity With Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author explains the difference between teaching critical thinking and critical literacy with children's literature. She suggests ways teachers may select current children's literature that touches upon social justice and equity instead of just reading aloud old favorites that do not stimulate students' thinking about their world. She shares the steps for analyzing student diversity in classrooms and creating classroom libraries that match students' backgrounds and interests. Also, she describes a practical way teachers may prepare to conduct critical literacy discussions using a Classroom Literacy Folio. The folio includes summaries, personal connections, possible ways diversity may be included in selected books, and lesson ideas for how to introduce students to current issues so even young children can think critically. Included is a sample format, a completed Classroom Literacy Folio page, and suggestions for some of the latest children's literacy books that emphasize social justice and equity.

INTRODUCTION

According to Cervetti et al. (2001), there is a difference between critical thinking and critical literacy. An example of teaching critical thinking with children's literature is when teachers ask students to analyze the plot in a fairy tale. They might ask students to identify the point of view of the narrator, if the characters are round or flat, or if the illustrations add to the quality. Critical literacy focuses on sociopolitical issues expressed in all forms of literacy in its broadest definition including movies, videos, advertisements, and books. It involves engaging students to understand power and inequities in the world (Labadie et al., 2012) and act on what they analyze (Behrman, 2006). If teachers are teaching critical literacy, they might ask students to think about the assumptions of power, social justice, and equity and

become agents of social change (Coffey,2010). As Miller and Sharp (2018) say, "If we want students to grow up believing in, and fighting for, equity for all, then it starts with the stories we read together."

BACKGROUND

Many teachers are aware of the potential of children's literature to expand children's horizons. Bishop (1990) suggested children's literature has the potential to mirror the world and open windows to appreciate the world of others, as well as sliding doors to experience the lives of others. In the increasingly shrinking world, this suggests a guiding principle for teachers. Yet, research (Lickteig & Russell, 1993) has shown that most teachers read aloud their old favorites, classics such as *Charlotte's Web*. Even though these are captivating books that deserve to be shared, they do not include issues some more current national and international books present which are conducive to critical literacy discussions. There are newer publications that bring a global perspective to students. Short (2018) has suggested ways for teachers to broaden the worldview of adolescents. While she recognizes the importance of including the classics in literature, she encourages teachers to pair classics with young adult global literature that reflects more current contexts with more relevance to the students' lives. Elementary school teachers can also create text sets for younger students to compare conditions around the world or from different time periods. The teachers in Comber & Simpson's (2001) edited book also explains how they have brought critical literacy into their reading instruction with socially disadvantaged students. Vasquez (2004) explains how expanding the curriculum to include global issues can still meet the mandated curricular competencies. Short (2018) advocates changing the curriculum, if possible, by replacing some of the required readings with global literature to facilitate students' world perspectives so differences are positive, not problematic. Moll (2017) advocates that teachers introduce transculturality, the concept of using one's language and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2016) from their own culture to achieve one's goals. Students will become inspired by stories from diverse cultures, realizing how ingenious others can be.

From a Sociocultural perspective, newer books have the potential to stimulate critical literacy and may create a more welcoming classroom for diverse student populations who may be newcomers to our communities. This chapter suggests activities for teachers to prepare for meaningful critical discussions using examples of recently published children's books.

Why should teachers bring critical literacy discussions to the classroom? According to the Freedom to Teach statement by four professional teacher organizations

teachers are uniquely important leaders who, in educating current and new generations of students, bear responsibility for this country's future. They are trained professionals with one of the hardest and most demanding jobs, a job that requires deep commitment, but brings little financial reward (Strauss, 2022)

Yet, "in the recent culture wars, they are being treated as enemies" (Strauss, 2022) according to the statement, which is the first time these groups have joined together to demand the freedom to do their jobs. They feel they are being attacked if they bring in issues related to race, gender, sexual orientation, or other topics. The teachers want to "exercise their professional judgment to decide which materials best suit their students in meeting the curriculum" (Strauss, 2022).

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