

# Teaching Critical Literacy



“It has taken some time, but my students have learned to comprehend in a deeper way. It’s like when we talk about reading beyond, under, over, and around the text. When my students are engaged from a critical perspective, they comprehend beyond, under, over and around their previous level of understanding.”

**BETH GRESS**, third grade teacher

**J**ennifer is a member of our teacher group. As an advocate of critical literacy, she knows, as we do, that knowledge is socially constructed, open-ended, and continuously unfolding. We also know that critical literacy is acquired over time through thoughtful deliberation and practice. Consequently, it is important that we be patient, thoughtful risk-takers as we strive to create classroom atmospheres that encourage and challenge students to become critically literate.

As teachers, we know that motivation is essential for successful teaching and learning experiences. We want our students to be enthusiastically involved in their learning, so we strive to use engaging texts and teaching techniques. We also know that using instructional frameworks helps us to successfully organize, plan, and teach meaningful lessons.

In this chapter we focus on these and other aspects of teaching critical literacy. We begin by discussing the engaged learner and describing some motivational practices. Next, we present two instructional frameworks, one

that we use to teach critical literacy strategies, and another that we use to teach critical literacy lessons in which students apply the strategies. These are followed by descriptions of critical literacy strategies and their classroom applications. Finally, we discuss how to select texts to use when teaching critical literacy and provide some examples.

## How Can We Motivate Students to Become Critically Literate?

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As with all aspects of learning, engagement and motivation are key factors when teaching critical literacy. We want our students to choose to be actively engaged and to construct personal meaning. Engaged learners are characterized as:

- ◆ achieving because they want to understand
- ◆ possessing intrinsic motivations for interacting with text
- ◆ viewing reading as a thinking process
- ◆ sharing knowledge through discussion with teachers and peers
- ◆ reading for different purposes
- ◆ utilizing background knowledge, and socially constructing meaning

(Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997; Baker & Wigfield, 1999)

As teachers, we can nurture engagement by encouraging students to read for authentic purposes, make personal connections, focus on comprehension, and respond in meaningful ways.

To foster student motivation, we should be good reading models, create book-rich environments, provide opportunities for choice, promote familiarity with books in various genres, and offer incentives that reflect the values of reading (Gambrell 1996). Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, and Mazzoni (1996) note that highly motivated readers read for a wide variety of reasons including curiosity, involvement, social interchange, and emotional satisfaction.

There is a wide variety of ideas and conditions that motivate students to read. We may already be using some of these ideas in our teaching; others may be new. They include but are not limited to:

- ◆ Making reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing pleasurable, and providing sufficient time for students to engage in these activities.
- ◆ Creating a classroom library that includes multiple levels of narrative and informational texts, addresses a wide range of interests, provides access to a variety of genres, and promotes critical analysis.
- ◆ Providing time for active, creative responses to texts using discussion and multiple modes of response (writing, sketching, dramatizing, singing, projects, and so on) to promote critical analysis and creation of a range of new literacies.
- ◆ Encouraging and valuing students' independent thinking as they read, write, speak, listen, and view.

Although this list contains a variety of ideas, it is not exhaustive. As you prepare to teach your students about critical literacy, we invite you to think about other aspects of your teaching that may contribute to your students' motivation.

## What Instructional Frameworks Can We Use to Teach About Critical Literacy?

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When teaching students about critical literacy, there are two instructional frameworks we find helpful. The first is used to teach the critical literacy strategies. The second is used to teach critical literacy lessons in which students apply the strategies after they have learned what they are and how to use them. An extensive list of critical literacy strategies and ideas for classroom implementation follows the frameworks.

### THE STRATEGY INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK

When teaching critical literacy strategies, we often use the Guided Comprehension 5-step direct instruction process (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002a). This whole-class process involves explaining, demonstrating, guiding, practicing, and reflecting. In Figure 1, this teacher-directed, scaffolded process is adapted for use in teaching critical literacy strategies.

It's important to note that the teacher reads aloud in each step of this process. The students focus on learning what the strategy is and how to apply it in scaffolded settings. Figure 2 presents an example of using the Strategy Instruction Framework and Seymour Simon's informational book *Wolves* to teach Problem Posing.

FIGURE 1

## THE GUIDED COMPREHENSION DIRECT INSTRUCTION FRAMEWORK

(McLaughlin & Allen, 2002a)

**EXPLAIN** what the critical literacy strategy is and how it works.

**DEMONSTRATE** the strategy, using a think-aloud, a read-aloud, and an overhead projector or chalkboard.

**GUIDE** the students to work in small groups or with partners to create responses.

**PRACTICE** by having students work with partners or independently to apply the critical literacy strategy.

**REFLECT** on how the strategy helps students read from a critical stance.

## CRITICAL LITERACY LESSON FRAMEWORK

When the students are comfortable using one or more critical literacy strategies, we organize our lessons using the literacy lesson framework presented in Figure 3, which emphasizes engaging, guiding, and extending students' thinking. The format also includes a reflective component. Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7 describe the teaching ideas referenced in the "guiding" segment of the Critical Literacy Lesson Framework: Bookmark Technique, Patterned Partner Reading, Connection Stems, and Say Something. Primary, intermediate, and middle school examples of teacher-authored, classroom-taught lessons based on the Critical Literacy Lesson Framework can be found in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

## What Strategies Can We Use to Teach Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy strategies—or starting points for teaching and learning—help readers to think about texts from a critical perspective. The strategies, which are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used, promote critical discussions based on reflection and resulting action that leads to more reflection and other resulting actions. Examples of how this works in primary,

intermediate, and middle school classrooms can be found in the students' responses in the themed lessons in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

The purpose of the strategies is to provide direction for students as they engage in critical analysis—examining social issues and power relations. Their role in critical literacy is similar to that of reading comprehension strategies that support students' understanding of text.

In the following section we describe a variety of frequently used critical literacy strategies and provide examples of each. Primary, intermediate, and middle school lessons based on these strategies can be found in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

## TEACHING A CRITICAL LITERACY STRATEGY USING THE GUIDED COMPREHENSION DIRECT INSTRUCTION PROCESS

(McLaughlin & Allen, 2002b)

### **EXPLAIN** what the critical literacy strategy is and how it works.

I began by explaining the critical literacy strategy Alternative Perspectives. I explained to students that when we examine alternative perspectives, we explore the points of view of different characters in a story or different people in a real-life situation. I told them that sometimes there are many characters in a book, but the story is usually only told from one character's point of view. I also explained that sometimes factual information is written from just one perspective and that we need to question what that perspective is and what other perspectives might be. I explained that after we read the text, we would discuss it from alternative perspectives and think about what we would do as a result of our reading from a critical perspective.

### **DEMONSTRATE** the strategy, using a think-aloud, a read-aloud, and an overhead projector or chalkboard.

I demonstrated Alternative Perspectives by introducing an informational text, *Wolves* by Seymour Simon. I shared the cover and the title with the students and I read aloud the first few pages of the book. Then I stopped to think aloud about the perspective from which this book was written. I told the class, "As I looked at the cover and started reading, I remembered that a lot of what I know about wolves came from reading fairy tales and stories, and I think the author wants me to have more information about real wolves

because the pictures he includes are pictures of real wolves. I remember that in the fairy tales, the wolves sometimes had kind of sly smiles when they were trying to trick somebody. I also remember seeing some funny drawings of wolves, and wolves that stood up like people, which I don't see in this book by Seymour Simon. In this book there are photographs of real wolves. I wonder if Seymour Simon took the photographs." I continued to read aloud and think aloud as I finished reading the next segment of the text. I said, "In this book the author says that what we read about wolves in fairy tales is different from the way wolves really are. He shares information, including the fact that a lot of people think about wolves as killers, but a healthy wolf has never killed a person. That's interesting because in the fairy tales I have read, wolves did kill people. So, this has taught me something about how the wolves in fairy tales are different from the wolves discussed in this book."

### **GUIDE** the students to work in small groups or with partners to create responses.

I invited the students to work in small groups and prompted them to consider the perspective from which Seymour Simon had written his book, as I continued to read the text aloud and share the photographs that illustrate it. After providing time for group discussions and monitoring their progress, I asked students to share their ideas with the class. Melissa and David said that they

thought the author wrote from the point of view of someone who knew a lot about wolves, and they wanted to see how many facts they could learn about wolves from this book. Jimez said that he had been in the woods camping, but he had never seen a wolf, so Seymour Simon must know right where to look for wolves. Jimez also wondered if Seymour Simon had to take a lot of pictures and how close he had to get to the wolves to take the pictures. He thought Seymour Simon must really like wolves. Melanie, Jimez's partner, said that the wolves were like us in some ways. She said that they have homes and families and the dad goes out to get food. That makes the wolves seem to be like us. She also said that in the fairy tales the wolves are tricky and mean. Whoever wrote the fairy tales must not have liked wolves. They thought the author wanted us to believe that what he wrote about wolves was the way they really were so that he could encourage people to like wolves and have more wolves in the forest. That led to a discussion of how we could know that what Seymour Simon wrote about wolves was true. We decided that the best way to know that was to check other informational sources about wolves.

**PRACTICE** by having students work with partners or independently to apply the critical literacy strategy.

The students continued to analyze the perspective represented in the text, and I continued to monitor their small-group discussions. In our subsequent whole-class discussion, Cody said, "Most of what I knew about wolves, I knew from fairy tales. I thought they were scary—like the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*. There's a lot more about real

wolves in this book. What Seymour Simon said about wolves was different from what I thought about wolves. He saw them in a different way." Cody's final comment launched us into a discussion about the fact that different people can view things in different ways, and we need to think about other perspectives, or points of view, when we are using Alternative Perspectives. Later in our discussion, we decided to make posters that contained drawings and facts about wolves and hang them in the school hallway so that others could learn what we had learned about wolves.

**REFLECT** on how the strategy helps us read from a critical stance.

After our discussion about *Wolves* ended, we talked about using Alternative Perspectives with other texts in other situations. Alicia said that she thought we could use it when we read stories. So we talked about how we might apply it in *Cinderella*, a story we all knew. The students suggested that the story represented Cinderella's perspective, and could be examined from the stepmother's and stepsisters' points of view, as well as those of the fairy godmother, the prince, and others.

In our next lesson, I introduced a new text and reviewed Alternative Perspectives, making connections to our lesson on *Wolves* and our discussion of *Cinderella*. I could see that the students were progressing in their understanding of how to use this strategy. After using Alternative Perspectives in several more practice sessions, using both narrative and informational text, I could tell that students were comfortable using it, so I integrated it into our critical literacy lessons.

## PROBLEM POSING

Problem Posing is a critical literacy strategy that can be used with narrative and informational text, as well as hypertext, a variety of media, and conversations. After reading the text, viewing the video, or discussing the situation that is going to be analyzed, readers engage in critical literacy by using questions, such as the following, to engage in critical analysis:

- ◆ Who is in the text/picture/situation? Who is missing?
- ◆ Whose voices are represented? Whose voices are marginalized or discounted?
- ◆ What are the intentions of the author? What does the author want the reader to think?
- ◆ What would an alternative text/picture/situation say?
- ◆ How can the reader use this information to promote equity?

For example, readers could use these questions to deconstruct *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. This story is about a boy who periodically visits the Giving Tree as he ages. (For many people, *The Giving Tree* symbolizes the boy's mother because it is referred to as "her.") Each time he visits the tree, the tree tries to make him happy offering him her leaves for crowns, her apples to eat, her branches to build a

FIGURE 3

## CRITICAL LITERACY LESSON FRAMEWORK

### ENGAGING STUDENTS' THINKING

Before reading, engage students in the lesson by activating background knowledge, motivating students by introducing the text, and setting a purpose for reading.

### GUIDING STUDENTS' THINKING

During reading, help the students engage with the text by prompting them as they read silently, having them engage in Patterned Partner Reading (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002a) or other methods that promote engagement with text, such as the Bookmark Technique (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002a), Connection Stems (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), or Say Something (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). (See Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8 for descriptions of these teaching techniques.)

### EXTENDING STUDENTS' THINKING

After reading, help the students extend their reading from a critical stance by engaging in critical discussions and taking action based on what they have read.

**REFLECTION** At the conclusion of the lesson, reflect on (a) what you taught, (b) why you taught it, (c) how you think the lesson went, (d) how students reacted to the lessons, (e) what you plan to do to continue teaching from a critical perspective, and (f) what additional observations or comments you may have.

## PATTERNED PARTNER READING

(McLaughlin & Allen, 2002a)

**PURPOSES:** Patterned Partner Reading promotes strategic reading and provides a structure for reading interactively with a partner. Students can use Patterned Partner Reading with narrative or expository text.

### PROCEDURE:

1. Students select a text and a partner with whom they will read, or the teacher selects the text and assigns partners.
2. Partners determine the amount of text they will each read and which of the following patterns they will use to engage in the reading (or the teacher selects which pattern will be used during a particular lesson).

Patterns include but are not limited to:

**Read–Pause–Predict:** Partners begin by making predictions based on the cover and title of the book. Next, they take turns reading a page silently or orally. After reading each page, they pause to confirm or revise their predictions and make new predictions about the next page. This process continues throughout the reading.

**Read–Pause–Discuss:** Partners take turns reading a page silently or orally. After reading each page, they pause. Each asks the other a question about the section of the text just read, to which the other partner responds. This process continues throughout the reading.

**Read–Pause–Make Connections:** Partners take turns reading a page silently or orally. After reading each page, they pause to make and share Text–Self,

Text–Text, or Text–World Connections. When using this pattern, students can use Connection Stems, such as “This reminds me of...,” “I remember an experience I had like that,” “I remember another book I read about this.”

**Read–Pause–Sketch:** Partners take turns reading a page silently or orally. After reading each page, they pause and each sketches an idea from that page of text. Then the partners share and discuss their drawings. (A blackline master that contains multiple sketching spaces facilitates this process.) This continues throughout the reading.

**Read–Pause–Bookmark:** Partners take turns reading a page silently or orally, pausing periodically to complete bookmarks noting the most interesting information: something that confused them, a vocabulary word they think the whole class should talk about, or an illustration, graphic, or map that helped them to understand what they read.

### Read–Pause–Retell or

**Read–Pause–Summarize:** Partners take turns reading a page silently or orally. After reading each page, they pause and the listening partner retells what happened on that page (narrative text) or summarizes (informational text). This process continues throughout the reading.

3. Students discuss in a whole- or small-group setting the text they have read.



house, and her trunk to build a boat, in which the boy sails far away. Though at the beginning the boy is happy with the tree, he never thanks her or gives anything to her.

After reading the text, the teacher might ask, *Who is in the text/picture/situation? Who is missing?* Students are pretty quick to understand that the book is about a boy and a tree that is a symbol for his mother. When they think about what is missing they notice that the mother has no husband, companions, or outside interests other than the boy. This leaves the impression that the mother is totally devoted to her son, with no purpose in life other than to make the son happy. The boy, in contrast, appears to have a full life away from the tree. Although it may not be significant, the fact that the boy has no siblings reinforces the reader's perception of him as the sole focus of his mother's love and attention.

The next concept is difficult for students of any age to understand at first because people so rarely think about voice and the author's intentions. Some possible ways to ask the question are: *Whose voices are represented? Who is the hero of the book? Who do you love in this book? Whose perspective does the author favor?* The reader is *positioned* (see Appendix A) to feel a combination of warmth and sadness for the mother who happily gives everything to the boy. So the voice represented in this book is apparently the voice of self-sacrificing mothers, who receive scant gratitude or love in return. *Whose voices are marginalized or discounted?* While at first the boy plays

FIGURE 5

## BOOKMARK TECHNIQUE

(McLaughlin & Allen, 2002a)

**PURPOSES:** Bookmark Technique helps students monitor their comprehension and make evaluative judgments about texts. Students can use this technique while reading narrative or expository text.

### PROCEDURE:

1. Students create four bookmarks by folding and cutting an 8.5" x 11" sheet of paper into four equal parts (or you can provide precut blackline masters).
2. As students read, they make decisions about and record specific information on each bookmark, including the page and paragraph where their choice is located:

**Bookmark 1:** Write about and/or sketch the part of the text that they find most interesting.

**Bookmark 2:** Write and/or sketch something they find confusing.

**Bookmark 3:** Write a word they think the whole class needs to discuss.

**Bookmark 4:** Choose an illustration, graph, or map that helped them understand what they read.

3. After reading, the ideas the students have recorded on the bookmarks are used as a basis for discussion.

## CONNECTION STEMS

(Adapted from Harvey & Goudvis, 2000)

**PURPOSES:** Connection Stems are prompts that provide a structure to make connections while reading narrative and informational texts. These prompts help students to monitor their thinking and encourage reflection during reading.

### PROCEDURE:

1. Students use Connection Stems, such as those listed below, to make connections as they read a text.
2. Students complete Connection Stems orally, in writing, or by sketching.
3. When sharing their completed Connection Stems, students use text support and personal experiences to explain their connections.
4. Students share the completed stems through discussion or journal responses.
5. Students make connections throughout the reading of the text.

Examples of Connections Stems:

- ◆ That reminds me of . . .
- ◆ I remember when . . .
- ◆ I have a connection . . .
- ◆ An experience I have had like that . . .
- ◆ I felt like that character when . . .
- ◆ If I were that character, I would . . .
- ◆ I remember another book about this . . .

in the tree and is happy, he eventually becomes an ungrateful consumer of his mother's generosity. The boy is not a very admirable character and so his voice is marginalized. Typically, when students realize how they have been positioned by the author, they start to tell stories about how they are not like the boy in the story. They claim that they are helpful to their parents and happy and grateful for the things they are given.

*What does the author want the reader to think?* This question helps us understand that the author probably has a subtext or a philosophy of life he is forwarding with this book. The reader may conclude that Shel Silverstein's motivation for writing *The Giving Tree* was to promote selflessness and the joy of giving. However, we could also assume that he wanted to protest the inequity in some parent-child relationships.

*What would an alternative text/picture/situation say?* The idea here is to get the reader to understand the perspective of the book being analyzed by trying to come up with a story that has an alternative theme or character. In response to this question, some students might imagine a story similar to *The Giving Tree*, except that the child is grateful, or that instead of the parent giving, the child cares for the parent, who may be old or in the hospital. A second example of an alternative text might be a situation in which the boy helps the parent do chores such as

washing the dishes and preparing the food. In a third possible alternative text, the mother and the boy both have friends they enjoy and don't appear to be desperately joined together. Coming up with a counter or alternative text can be a very useful tool for clarifying what the original text represents.

*How can the reader use this information to promote equity?* This question encourages the reader to use the information they learned to promote fairness. In the case of *The Giving Tree*, the reader might reflect on the fact that people sometimes write stories in order to make a point or promote certain standards of behavior. Perhaps such a story establishes high moral ground for the mother, giving her higher status. By paying attention to the motivations of the person who chooses the story or tells the story of *The Giving Tree*, the reader can learn not to be unfairly positioned by another.

In another example, we could use some of these or similar questions to critically analyze a passage in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. The teacher might ask *Who is in the text and who is missing?* when Hagrid the Giant visits Harry on his birthday to tell him that he will be going to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Hagrid embarrasses Harry's caretakers, the Dursleys, and their son, Dudley, by frustrating and intimidating them. We are led to believe that Hagrid's behavior is justified because Harry has been treated unfairly by his guardian. Readers take joy in seeing Uncle Vernon put in his place by Hagrid, in part because the text seems to favor Harry's perspective and the idea that Harry should exact retribution for the Dursleys' poor treatment of him. Students might observe that the Dursleys' perspective is missing in this passage.

FIGURE 7

## SAY SOMETHING

(Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996)

**PURPOSES:** Say Something helps students to monitor their reading by making connections.

Students can use this technique while reading narrative or informational text.

### PROCEDURE:

1. Students work in pairs to read a text (student- or teacher-selected).
2. At student-selected or teacher-designated points, students stop to "say something" to their partner about what they have read. For example, what they say might be an idea that was new to them or a comment about a character's actions. (If the text has subheadings, these make good stopping points).
3. Students repeat this process throughout the reading of the text.

Another perspective that is missing is the idea that instead of mocking the Dursleys, Harry and Hagrid could be more gracious and forgiving toward the Dursleys.

Next, the teacher might question, *What might an alternative text show?* An alternative text might show a polite but persistent Hagrid and Harry helping Uncle Vernon understand the importance of Harry's birthday and impending trip to Hogwarts.

After discussing these points, readers might question, *How can we use this information to promote justice and equity?* Readers need to understand that although most people *enjoy* seeing the pretentious, controlling authoritarian get his due, in reality it is unlikely that a giant (or some kind of superhero) would come to the rescue. The text doesn't inform the readers very well about how to negotiate with bullies such as Uncle Vernon. It tells the readers that even if they think it is wrong, they may enjoy identifying a bad guy in the story and seeing him embarrassed. This, however, does not make the humiliation right or effective. Humiliation deepens divisions between people and promotes misunderstanding. As Harry discovers, Uncle Vernon's anger and distrust of all things magical increases, perhaps in part due to their humiliation of him. Justice and equity would be better served by less humiliating discussions with Uncle Vernon.

### **The Rest of the Story** (McLaughlin, 2000)

The Rest of the Story is an adaptation of Problem Posing that encourages students to use their background knowledge to examine what is missing or underrepresented in a text and to research that perspective. For example, when pondering what is missing from a history text's account of World War II, some may note that information about the Japanese-American Internment is not included. Students can then use other resources, including the Internet, to learn The Rest of the Story about the Japanese-American Internment. Trade books that would support this investigation include *Baseball Saved Us*, *The Bracelet*, and *So Far From the Sea*. (Annotations of these volumes can be found in Appendix B.) Students might discover facts such as that Japanese-American Internment occurred in the United States, that Japanese Americans gave up life as they knew it and were held in internment camps, and that when World War II ended, many of those interned found that their properties, jobs, and businesses had been taken by non-Japanese Americans. When students complete their research, they present it to the class in a mode of their choosing (picture book, press conference, etc.) and use it as a starting point for critical discussion. This helps students demonstrate an understanding of author and text bias.

## Switching

Another effective way to prompt students to use Problem Posing is through Switching. In this strategy, after reading the text, the reader responds to selected questions, such as *What gender is represented in the text?* Then, he imagines an alternative version of the story by switching genders, critically analyzing the author's emphasis on one gender and how the message would change if the other gender were emphasized. For example, gender discrimination becomes obvious when reimagining the story of *Homeless Bird* by Gloria Wheelan, in which Koly, a 13-year-old Indian girl, leaves her family to get married. When her husband dies, she cannot remarry or work because of Indian customs. The groom's family, with whom she must live, sees her as a burden, consuming the family resources, and she becomes despised by others and herself. If the reader reimagined the story and created a Gender Switch, putting a boy in Koly's place, the main character's problems would disappear because boys in India don't have the same taboos girls do. The reader could also do a Setting Switch, sending Koly to the United Kingdom where she would be expected to stay in school and would later be allowed to remarry.

Examples of Switching include:

**GENDER SWITCH** If there are mostly boys in the text, switch the characters to mostly girls. How does your thinking about the story change when you replace key characters with people of the opposite gender? In *The Castle in the Attic* by E. Winthrop, how would the story change if William and his friend the knight were both girls?

**THEME SWITCH** Make up a different story with the opposite theme or a different but closely related theme as a way to look at the story in a different way. If the theme is "peace is good," imagine a story in which "force is good." How does that change the story? How might *Redwall* by B. Jacques change if Matthias were mostly nonviolent instead of violent in defense of Redwall Abbey?

**SETTING SWITCH** Tell the story in a different setting—time, place, social class. How would it change the story? How might *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan be different if Esperanza were going not from Mexico to California but from Canada to Oregon?

**BODY-STYLE SWITCH** If the main characters are tall, how would the story be different if they were short? If the main characters are big, how would the story change if they were small? If the main characters are athletic, how would the story change if they were not so athletic? How might *The Bad Beginning: A Series of Unfortunate Events, Book One* by Lemony Snicket change if the Baudelaire children were tall and muscular instead of slight and fragile?

**CLOTHING SWITCH** How would the story change if the characters were dressed differently—preppy, gang, formally, hip-hop?

**EMOTION SWITCH** Reimagine a story in which the characters have a different emotional tone. If activity and action are prevalent in the text, make up a story in which the characters are more calm and thoughtful. If the characters are always cracking jokes, reimagine the story with serious characters.

**ETHNIC/RACE SWITCH** What if the characters were given different ethnic or racial characteristics? What if the main character in *Talkin' About Bessie* by N. Grimes were a white woman instead of Bessie Coleman, an African American? How would the story change?

**LANGUAGE SWITCH** Tell the story using accents, vocabulary, and expressions from a different country, a different section of the country, the “hood,” or the university. Read “The Really Ugly Duckling,” Jon Scieszka’s transformational fairy tale from *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, in a style representing the “hood.” How would that change the story?

**RELATIONSHIP/ORGANIZATION SWITCH** If the main characters are friends, recreate the story with the main characters as family members. If the main characters are part of a large family and their grandmother is living with them, consider how the story would change if it were about a single person living alone, or a single father with his daughter. Imagine a relationship change in Eve Bunting’s *Fly Away Home*. How would it change the story?

Thinking critically about what is missing from a text leads to the exploration of related critical queries, including *Why did the author choose not to report certain information?* *What did the author want us to believe?* and *What can we do to promote a just understanding of this topic?* These inquiries encourage the students to extend their understanding of power relationships and to take action to promote social justice.

## ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

When we examine alternative perspectives, we explore the viewpoints of different characters in a story or different people in a real-life situation. These characters or people may be present in the story or situation, or they may be created or imagined by the reader. The class then discusses the perspectives in a critical conversation. Formats students have used to share perspectives include focus groups, dramatization, poetry, and song lyrics.

There are a number of critical literacy strategies that help readers create Alternative Perspectives. These include Alternative Texts, Juxtapositioning, Mind and Alternative Mind Portraits, and Theme-Based Focus Groups.

### **Alternative Texts**

An alternative text represents a perspective that is different from the one the reader is reading. When creating an alternative text, the reader perceives the text in a different way and begins to understand the complexity of the issue examined. Alternative texts can be developed when reading narrative or informational text. For example, when reading the traditional story of the three little pigs, students can write an alternative version to develop the story from a different perspective. When reading an informational text, such as P. Busby's *First to Fly*, which recounts the Wright brothers' flying experiences, students could write an alternative historical account told from the perspectives of others who were attempting to be the first to fly a plane. The text can consist of oral, written, visual, or imagined representations including, but not limited to, drawings, oral descriptions, dramatizations, and songs. When using this technique, students can examine the message conveyed by a text, photo, or song and then write an alternative text, take or find an alternative photo, or create counter-lyrics. For example, after seeing a billboard of happy people having dinner in their expensive house, a student might choose to write an alternative text about a family that is sad because it is homeless and depends on shelters for food and beds.

Students can create alternative texts in all subject areas. For example, middle school students created alternative texts in science class after reading newspaper articles about the effects of medical waste pollution on the ocean and about developments in the use of cloning. In music class, the students created alternative lyrics to a variety of songs, including “Cats in the Cradle,” and in social studies, they created alternative texts expressing views on a variety of political issues.

**CHARACTER SUBSTITUTIONS** In this approach, the reader replaces an existing character with a new character that has a different personality. For example, students might substitute their mother, Batman, Sponge Bob, a youth-group leader, or the Cat in the Hat for an existing character and explain what the character would say or do if he/she were in the story. Or, imagine the story of *Cinderella* if Sponge Bob were the prince. Character Substitutions allow students to use their own prior knowledge of different personalities to create alternative texts. In a similar way, students might substitute a different setting for the one in the text.

**CHARACTER PERSPECTIVES** In this approach, the reader examines the motives of different characters and reorients the facts of the story to fit the desires of one character. In Yangsook Choi’s *The Name Jar*, a Korean student, Unhei, is embarrassed when students on the school bus make fun of her name. If Character Perspectives were used with this book, an American student living in Korea might be the character experiencing the embarrassment and sadness caused by the children laughing at her name. As a result of this new perspective, an American reader might better understand Unhei’s feelings and have empathy for her.

When there aren’t many characters in the story, the reader can construct alternative texts by imagining all of the people that the principal character might be in contact with every day in the community. Then, the reader can describe how the other people in the community might tell the story in a completely different way than does the principal character.

## **Juxtapositioning**

Juxtaposing involves examining two contrasting texts or two pictures next to each other to make the contrast between them obvious. It is used as a strategy to help the reader disrupt the commonplace and see the text in a different way. Readers can also juxtapose different pictures, poems, or songs. This strategy helps the students understand that the



same occurrence can be perceived in many different ways and that the story or photo we see in the newspaper simply represents one person's perception of a situation.

**JUXTAPOSITIONING TEXTS** (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004) When using this strategy, students examine two texts that have been written about the same topic in order to analyze author bias. For example, two editorials—one supporting increased security in schools, one opposing it; one supporting gun control, one opposing it; one supporting a mandatory helmet law, one opposing it—would clearly show how two different writers view a topic. Of course, texts in which the differences in thinking are more subtle can also be used. When a text or situation is described from one point of view only, it is more difficult to discern the bias in the text. However, when readers can compare and contrast the juxtaposed texts, it is easier to see the bias.

**PHOTO JUXTAPOSITIONING** (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004) When using photo juxtapositioning, two photos that demonstrate different views are examined from a critical stance. For example, Michael Gress, a middle school teacher, juxtaposed two photographs that appeared on the front page of two different American newspapers before the United States went to war in Afghanistan. One photo showed a seven-year-old boy staring into the camera, raising a pistol in the air while sitting on a man's shoulders. Around them, masses of traditionally dressed men with beards held up posters attacking Israel and the United States. The caption on the photo read, "Social Chaos in Afghanistan." The other photo showed a six-year-old Afghani boy running away, carrying his one-year-old sister on his back and looking back over his shoulder in fear. By examining both pictures and discussing them from a critical stance, students came to understand that the photos were not neutral, but rather that each had a strong bias and power to influence the viewer's understanding of which group was the subordinated one. The photographers created the perspectives that were represented.

**Mind and Alternative Mind Portraits** (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002b)

In this technique (see examples in Chapters 3 and 5) readers examine two points of view. Both may be represented in the story or one may appear in the text and the other silenced or missing from the text. Students begin by selecting the two perspectives they will analyze. Next, they sketch the silhouettes of two heads. In the first silhouette, they write words, sketch drawings, or create collages that represent the first person's perspective. Then they do the same for the second perspective. The completed Mind and Alternative Mind Portraits are shared with peers and used as the starting point for

critical discussion. Examples of this can be seen when first grade students, who are reading the Arthur the Aardvark books by Marc Brown, create a Mind Portrait of Arthur and an Alternative Mind Portrait of his sister, D. W., or when older students read *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson and create a Mind Portrait for Melinda and an Alternative Mind Portrait for one of her teachers or classmates. In both examples, the completed Mind and Alternative Mind Portraits would be juxtaposed to provide two perceptions of the same story.

### **Theme-Based Focus Groups** (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004)

Theme-based focus groups help students to investigate bias and critically analyze how authors view events from different points of view. When preparing to use theme-based focus groups, teachers choose a text to read aloud to the class and gather a variety of theme-related texts to make available for small-group reading. The teacher reads aloud every day and the students select a related title to read and discuss in a small-group setting. When the read-aloud text and the small-group texts have been read, students leave their original text-based small groups and reorganize into different small groups—groups in which each member has read a different theme-based text. The newly created small groups (Jigsaw II) then discuss the theme, with students contributing ideas based on the text read. Students then engage in whole-group discussion and often extend their thinking by creating theme-related projects.

When using juxtapositioning in theme-based focus groups about World War II, Judy Burke, a sixth grade teacher, used a whole-class setting to read aloud excerpts from *The Greatest Generation* by Tom Brokaw, a theme-related text that represents the perspective of Allied soldiers. Students then self-selected theme-related books and were organized in small groups based on their choices. The theme-based books represented a variety of other perspectives, including those of German soldiers, victims of the Holocaust, victims of the Japanese-American Internment, citizens of Japan, citizens of Pearl Harbor, and a variety of political leaders including Winston Churchill. After the teacher finished reading aloud, the students read and discussed in their small groups the perspective represented in their books. Next, the groups reorganized (Jigsaw II) so that every new group was composed of students who had read novels that represented different perspectives. Small-group discussions focused on multiple perspectives and juxtaposed views. Students began by describing the people or characters in the books they had read and how those characters perceived World War II. Many students found the number of



perspectives surprising, noting that before they engaged in the theme, they had only thought about World War II from the point of view of the American military. They noted that they had failed to consider not only perspectives such as those of the victims of Japanese-American Internment, but also the perspectives of those working on the home front or of families waiting for the soldiers to return home. An interesting discussion of the media also resulted. It focused on the immediacy of information we experience now as compared to the radio news and handwritten letters that were used to communicate military developments during World War II. After in-depth small-group discussion, the students created visual representations of all the perspectives, and the various viewpoints were discussed in a whole-class setting. (See Appendices B and C for texts and websites related to this theme.)

In a fifth-grade thematic study on immigration, Rich Watkins' students chose to read one of five books about the immigrant experience (*Esperanza Rising*, *A Step from Heaven*, *The Other Side of Truth*, *Habibi*, and *Goodbye, Vietnam*) for their theme-based focus group. The understanding of each of the five different situations—Mexican immigrants in a California labor camp, Korean immigrants who thought of America as “heaven,” Nigerians smuggled to London after the murder of a parent, an Arab-American family relocating to Jerusalem, and Vietnamese remembering life in Vietnam during the war—

gave the students a much more complex view of the phenomenon of immigration than they could have had after studying just one book. These different perspectives problematize the idea of immigration.

Reading and discussing these books provides a more realistic view of the immigrants' many difficulties and hard-fought victories. The ensuing discussion also disrupts the commonplace notion of the joys of immigration. As a result of this experience, the class found ways to help immigrant students adjust to their new lives.

Critical literacy strategies such as Problem Posing and Alternative Perspectives—and their numerous adaptations—are adaptable across curriculum areas. They provide opportunities to situate critical literacy in a variety of contexts and encourage teachers and students to view critical literacy as a natural part of learning.

## How Can We Select Texts to Support Our Teaching of Critical Literacy?

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There are numerous examples of narrative and informational text that we can use when teaching and learning about critical literacy. These titles represent multiple genres and run the gamut from informational texts to traditional and transformational fairy tales.

In this section, we explain how these texts support the four dimensions of critical literacy: disruption of the commonplace, examination of multiple viewpoints, focus on sociopolitical issues, and action steps for social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). A variety of text examples are provided in each category. In addition, numerous annotated titles can be found in Appendix B and websites about selected themes can be found in Appendix C.

It is important to note that although these books facilitate critical literacy experiences, it is not the reading of these texts that generates critical consciousness but rather the critical analysis and discussion in which we and our students engage. It is our questioning, examining, exploring, probing, and juxtaposing that refines our critical awareness and encourages our students to read from a critical stance.

## Books That Disrupt the Commonplace and Provide Multiple Viewpoints

Some books are better at eliciting a critical response because the content or tone causes the reader to view a common situation from an entirely different perspective, disrupting stereotypical and commonly held assumptions. For example, in *A Special Fate: Chiune Sugihara, Hero of the Holocaust* by Alison Leslie Gold, a Japanese diplomat working in Lithuania acts in uncharacteristic ways by signing the transit visas of thousands of Jews throughout Europe, allowing the Jews to escape Nazi persecution during World War II. This text provides an alternative viewpoint to the idea that the Japanese were uncaring during World War II. It problematizes our understanding of what it meant to be Japanese during the war. This book also provides a good example of someone taking action toward promoting social justice.

Other texts present a range of perspectives. For example, *Bull Run* by Paul Fleischman recounts the famous Civil War battle from thirteen different perspectives, including those of a Union general, a slave caring for her master, who is a southern soldier, the sister of a soldier from Minnesota, and a physician. Similarly, *Talkin' About Bessie* (Grimes) presents multiple perspectives on Bessie Coleman's life. Family members, friends, and her flight instructor share their perceptions of the first African-American female pilot. Texts such as these facilitate juxtaposing alternative viewpoints.

Texts can also combine pictures and words in ways that encourage readers to understand the text on several different levels. For example, in *CLICK, CLACK, MOO: Cows That Type* (Cronin), farm animals complain about being cold at night, attempt to negotiate, and finally go on strike to force Farmer Jones to buy them electric blankets. Although at first glance this appears to be a humorous picture book about cows and a farmer, it can also be viewed as a story that recounts the power of organized labor in the negotiation process.

With some books, readers or viewers need to draw upon the different stories told in multiple-sign systems. For example, *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (1998) is a picture-book treatment of a poem written by Maya Angelou and illustrated by Jean-Michel Basquiat. Angelou's words dance whimsically with the unconcerned voice of an innocent child ("I go boo/Make them shoo/I make fun/Way they run") while Basquiat's pictures have a raw, edgy quality that makes them seem frightening. Based on the pictures alone, one might perceive the story in one way; based on the text alone, one might perceive it very differently.

Transformational fairy tales also disrupt the commonplace and help readers perceive multiple points of view. David Wiesner's book *The Three Pigs* is a good example of this. In this version of the classic fairy tale, the pigs get sneezed off the page of their story and blown into several other classic children's tales. In the end, the pigs decide to return to their own story, bringing with them a dragon from another tale to protect them from the wolf. In addition to the traditional fairy tale text, the pigs speak in different registers, making comments in comic-book speech bubbles such as "Hey! He blew me right out of the story!" Even the dragon's grateful and polite commentary opens up new character and plot possibilities when the dragon thanks the pig for taking him out of the book just as the prince was about to slay him ("Many thanks for rescuing me, O brave and noble swine"). Such shifting of registers is also common in the Magic School Bus series, in which the students in the class not only give information about the topic and participate in the narrative, but also comment, in speech bubbles apart from the story, about how they are feeling and what they are thinking. The use of nontraditional plots, characters, and settings challenges reader expectations and requires different ways of reading and viewing (Smith, 2003).



Some books actually invite the reader to recast the story from a different perspective or to recast it as if the reader were in the text providing multiple viewpoints. For example, throughout *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss, the fish reminds us about what mother would think about having the Cat in the Hat in the house. He begs us to think about the story from the mother's perspective. Also, at the end of the book Seuss asks readers whether they would tell the mother what happened that day while she was gone.

Other books are intentionally written in a style so open-ended that the author requires the reader to carry the plot, character, or setting—allowing for multiple meanings in the story (Smith, 2003). In David Macaulay's *Black and White*, the story is separated into four different adjoining illustrated texts, each requiring the reader to construct what is happening in the story and how it relates to the other simultaneously progressing plots and characters. Similarly, in wordless picture books, such as David Wiesner's *Sector 7* and Alexandra Day's series about the dog Carl, it is the reader who determines the perspectives and the story emphases.

### **Books That Focus on Social or Political Issues Between Individuals or in Society**

Books that focus on social or political issues between individuals or in society at large provide rich contexts for discussions about critical literacy. For example, many books about the Holocaust encourage exploration of political and social issues of government and morality. Examples include *Number the Stars*, *Night*, and *My Hundred Children*.

*Letters from Rifka* by Karen Hesse offers examples of social and political immigrant issues that provide opportunities for students to take different views on freedom in society, disease control, and difficulties encountered during immigration.

In Ji Li Jiang's *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution*, a family wants to follow Mao but suffers many indignities because the grandfather had been a landlord. Political relationships interweave with social relationships in the very repressive society in China.

## Books That Focus on Action for Social Justice

There are many biographies and other books that describe actions people have taken to achieve social justice. Readings of these texts generate interesting critical discussions about ways in which people can be powerful in their own worlds. In *Nobody in Particular: One Woman's Fight to Save the Bay* by Molly Bang, Diane Wilson, the main character in this true story, tells how she, a shrimper with no education, negotiates with chemical companies for them to clean up the water. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles recounts the story of the young girl who was the first black child to attend an all-white school in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1960. And *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, by Doreen Rappaport describes the ways in which things Dr. King learned as a child helped him later in life and how nonviolent protest convinced lawmakers to vote to end segregation in the South. Dr. King's life is also wonderfully recounted in *My Brother Martin: A Sister Remembers Growing Up with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, a picture book written by his sister, Christine King Farris.

These books and numerous others, including those annotated in Appendix B, work especially well for teaching about critical literacy. They demonstrate to readers of all ages that their actions can change the world.

## Final Thoughts

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Contexts that foster critical literacy are characterized by critically aware teachers, actively engaged students, motivational settings, critical literacy strategies, thought-provoking texts, and substantial amounts of critical discussion. Contexts such as these support our students' introduction to reading both the word and the world—to becoming critically aware.

In Part Two, we contextualize the critical literacy strategies in teacher-designed lessons at various grade levels. The lessons, which explore Challenging the Text, Identities, and Seeing Beyond the Bias, are shared in the teachers' voices and feature numerous examples of student work.