



OF PRIMARY INTEREST

Using Read-Alouds with Critical Literacy Literature in K–3 Classrooms

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Teacher read-alouds are planned oral readings of children's books. They are a vital part of literacy instruction in primary classrooms. Teachers can use read-alouds to develop children's background knowledge, stimulate their interest in high-quality literature, increase their comprehension skills, and foster critical thinking. While reading, teachers model strategies that children can use during their own independent reading.

This article describes read-alouds that feature critical literacy literature. Critical literacy literature consists of high-quality children's books that prompt children to think and talk about social issues that impact their daily lives. The article includes a rationale for the importance of using children's literature and read-alouds in primary classrooms; a description of critical literacy and the kinds of children's books appropriate for critical literacy read-alouds; and an example of a critical literacy read-aloud in a first grade classroom by one of the authors.



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Wendy, Danielle, and Amos worked together in the Urban-Multicultural Teacher Education Program at the University of Tennessee, where Wendy was a graduate assistant during her doctoral program, Danielle earned her master's degree and teaching license, and Amos is a professor. All three continue to collaborate to support teaching and learning in urban K–3 settings.

Critical literacy read-alouds: Establishing the basics

Books play an important role in children's social and academic development. Reading high-quality books increases children's overall language competence, and the process of reading, listening, questioning, and responding to a story provides a foundation for reflective and critical thinking (Pressley 2006). Children emulate their teachers, and they are eager to read the books their teachers read (Cunningham 2005). Reading aloud from high-quality literature supports primary children's literacy development in multiple ways. Including the reading and discussion of criti-

cal literacy texts can add even more learning opportunities for young children.

Every read-aloud should include high-quality children's literature, but not every read-aloud has to feature a critical literacy text. In fact, texts are not critical in and of themselves; it is the conversations that take place around the texts that qualify as critical. Teachers initiate critical conversations through the questions they pose. Such conversations move beyond traditional who, what, when, and where questions to a deeper understanding that goes beyond the print on the page.

Before developing critical questions, a teacher must settle on a book for the read-aloud. Traditional children's books seldom address social issues of interest or importance to children, making the task of finding the right book a challenge. Harste (2000) believes that in order to have conversations about social issues, the books a teacher selects should meet one or more of the following criteria:

- explore differences rather than make them invisible
- enrich understandings of history and life by giving voice to those traditionally silenced or marginalized
- show how people can begin to take action on important social issues
- explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position people and groups of people as "others"
- don't provide "happily ever after" endings for complex social problems

Books that meet such criteria lend themselves to critical read-alouds by providing opportunities for children to critique the text and question the status quo.

The questions a teacher asks will depend on the text selected, the children in the class, the values of the school and community, and individual experiences. Simpson (1996) offers several suggestions to help teachers preparing for read-alouds. She suggests teaching children that

- characters are not real but constructed by authors and that stories are not reality but selective versions of it;
- authors lead the reader to respond to the story in particular ways through use of language, point of view, and other conventions, and that children can generate alternatives to authors' perspectives;
- authors leave gaps in stories, so readers can look for what is missing and explore why; and
- authors write for particular audiences and assume that these audiences have specific cultural knowledge and share certain values.

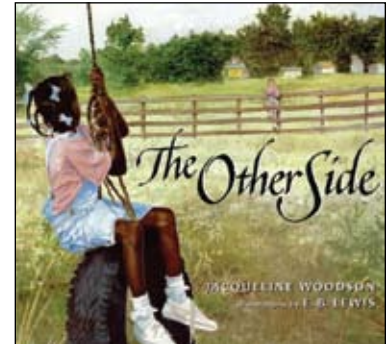
Primary-age (and younger) children are able to participate in discussions based on teachers' use of critical questions. Chafel and her colleagues have shown that young children can learn to make critical connections to read-aloud texts and respond to such questions as, "Who is telling the story?" "What do you think that person wants

us to think?" or "Why do you think the character is poor?" (Chafel et al. 2007). When children practice asking critical questions about the text, they are developing reading and thinking skills that can lead to powerful insights into how texts work, how readers can become more aware of their place in the reading process, and where they fit into the social world that surrounds them.

A teacher's critical literacy read-aloud

This section outlines steps in planning and implementing read-alouds with critical literacy literature, using Danielle's description of an actual read-aloud

she planned around a children's book, *The Other Side*. The read-aloud took place in an urban first grade class.



Select a book

The book I chose was *The Other Side*, by Jacqueline Woodson, a story about two young girls, one Black and one White, who are living through an era of high racial tension. The children live on opposite sides of a rail fence. The fence serves as a dividing line, yet allows them to see one another. The young girls don't understand why race brings conflict or why they are not allowed to cross the fence. Ultimately, they decide to break societal norms and find a way to play together.

Preview the book

After deciding to use *The Other Side*, I pre-read the book, looking for spots where I could bring out critical points inside the story and where I might be able to spark children's conversation about the racial divides symbolized by the fence. For example, there is a scene in the story when the two girls are in town with their mothers. As they pass one another, the girls want to make contact—but their mothers pull them apart. I teach in a multicultural classroom, and I know the children in my class have had experiences with racial separation. I planned to ask them how they think the girls felt and why they think the mothers responded the way they did.

During my prereading, I also looked for words that might be unfamiliar to the children. I identified vocabulary in the story to introduce during a mini-lesson prior to the read-aloud (for example, *polite*, *stare*, *partners*), and I made a note of words introduced in previous lessons, such as

segregation, race, and prejudice, that we would review before the read-aloud.

Develop critical questions to use during the read-aloud and post them in the book

During my prereading, I used sticky notes to mark the points I wanted to ask the children about during the read-aloud. I phrased my questions to elicit children's own questions, further their understanding of the issues in the book, and encourage the children to make connections between themselves and the text. Some of these questions were, "Why do you think that one of the Black girls said no when the White girl asked if she could play? How do you think the girls felt when this happened, and why?" and "What would you have said, and why?"

Conduct a mini-lesson to activate children's prior knowledge

Before the read-aloud, I led a mini-lesson during which children recalled Martin Luther King Jr. Day and the class lessons about segregation and racial issues. We also talked about some of the other Jacqueline Woodson books we had read—for example, *Our Gracie Aunt* and *Visiting Day*. I quickly previewed my list of unfamiliar vocabulary from *The Other Side*. We talked about some of the things that adults do not allow children to do and why they thought they were not supposed to do these things. The children talked about strangers, stealing, and disrespectful behaviors. Then we discussed why their families don't allow them to do certain things and what happens when they do them.

Do a picture walk

After the mini-lesson, we did a picture walk, beginning with the cover. Looking at the cover art, the class made predictions about what the title meant, and then we began to look through the pages. We talked about where and when the story might have taken place. As we moved through the illustrations, the children began to notice differences in the characters, particularly the emotions displayed on their faces. I encouraged the children to put together a story in their minds before we read the words.

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Read the story, stopping to discuss the questions

As we read through the story, I asked the questions on the sticky notes, and the children brought out connections to their own lives and to other texts. They talked among themselves, and asked their own questions about the characters and events in the story. For example, they asked, "Why can't they play together?" and "Why doesn't the little White girl have friends to play with?" One child asked, "Why don't they just take the fence down?"

Once we had read and discussed the story, I asked the children to think about why the author wrote it and what it means. We talked about how parts of the story are the same and different from how things are today. I concluded by inviting the children to write about how the events and characters in the story related to their own experiences. Later, the children shared what they had written, and we continued discussing the story and what they could learn from it.

In summary

All primary teachers should share engaging, interesting, well-written children's literature with their classes. The benefits of read-aloud experiences for the literacy development of young children are well established, and including critical literacy literature read-alouds expands those benefits even more. Young children should be exposed to all kinds of high-quality literature and learn to think critically about all the texts they encounter. Every read-aloud does not have to be about a social concern that impacts the lives of primary-age children, but every child should have the opportunity to think critically about textual representations of the world.

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