

Confronting Bias With Children's Literature: A Preservice Teacher's Journey to Developing a Critical Lens for Reading the Word and the World

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Preservice teachers learn along with their students to read through a critical lens by unpacking their assumptions and questioning the word and the world.

Educators have a responsibility to shape the future of literacy and students' role in our democratic society. Historically, the United States and its educational system have been created to serve some to maintain a hierarchy of power and privilege resulting in the marginalization of some groups. All children deserve access to quality education. They also need books that reflect their identities and expand their perspectives. When children see themselves and others in books, they are given the opportunity to see similarities and differences and move beyond a one-dimensional view of themselves and the world (Bishop, 1990).

Schools are microcosms of the larger society in which we live. However, although the number of students of color enrolled in elementary and secondary schools has surpassed the White population, the teaching force has remained predominantly White and female (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; Tatum, 2017). As Ladson-Billings (2001) reminded us, "the pervasiveness of whiteness makes the experience of most teachers the accepted norm" (p. 81), resulting in the perpetuation of the single story (Adichie, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary for teacher educators to prepare future teachers for working with students who have different linguistic, ethnic, racial, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds and identities than their own.

As our classrooms become increasingly diverse, it is essential that we create spaces where all voices, identities, and cultures are valued. Each student brings their own background, experiences, and views. They also bring their own biases and limited perspectives. For instance, White children as young

as 5 have shown bias in favor of Whiteness (Dunham, Baron, & Banaji, 2008). This was also found when the famous Clark doll test from the 1940s was replicated in 2010. The results revealed that White children developed stronger bias toward themselves as superior as they tended to identify the color of their skin with more positive attributes (Saad, 2020). As early as kindergarten, children have learned to associate some groups with higher status than others (Kinzer, 2016). Therefore, educators must work to help students unpack their assumptions and read critically to examine power relationships and move beyond a passive acceptance of text to question the word and the world (Freire, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 1987; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

We must acknowledge the ways education as a system positions some in power while marginalizing others. It is necessary to actively work to unpack and disrupt education practices to question whose voices are represented and who benefits from them. To create equitable classrooms, this work must begin with teacher preparation programs. Until we

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lead our preservice teachers to the epiphany of their own privilege and the impact that has on their decisions about texts, instruction, and interactions with students, we cannot reasonably expect change in their classroom communities. Therefore, we embed a critical literacy approach in our preparation of preservice teachers to help the candidates move beyond the passive acceptance of text and the world around them.

We describe Evelyn's (third author) journey as a preservice teacher as she develops a critical lens when engaging second graders in conversations around children's literature. Evelyn reflects on her own assumptions and how she became more critically conscious about her role as the teacher when supporting students as they engage in this work. We begin with a description of critical literacy as a framework for teaching. Evelyn then shares her reflective journey as she embarked upon developing her critical lens through her university literacy methods courses, application in her field-based practicum experiences, and her plans to transfer her learning experiences to her future classroom. We conclude with a final reflection.

Critical Literacy as a Framework

Critical literacy is not a lesson to teach in isolation or an add-on to our curriculum and standards. Rather, it is both a framework for our teaching and a way to view the world that illuminates everything that is read, viewed, heard, or written. It is an awareness, a consciousness about perspective, power, and intention. To become critically literate is to develop the ability to see and think about the story not told, the voice not honored, the information withheld, the message muted. Critical readers move beyond a passive acceptance of the text or the notion of "reading the lines" to an active stance of reading "between the lines" and "beyond the lines." The four resources model (Luke & Freebody, 1997) suggested the need for readers to be code breakers, meaning makers, text users, and text critics. Text critics dig beyond the surface level of literal understanding to examine issues of power and privilege. Critical readers recognize that no text and no reader is neutral. They explore their own assumptions and the assumptions made by the text. Thus, they work

to unpack their own perspective and assumptions as well as how the text positions them as readers.

Critical readers explore the counternarrative (see Figure 1) and work to gather information to understand the whole story. Deconstructing text helps readers reveal power relations and inequities that are also mirrored in society (Jones, 2006; Vasquez, 2010).

They bring this work beyond the pages of the text and apply it to real life, always seeking the full truth and questioning what factors might impede the truth from being revealed. By doing this work, critical readers avoid being manipulated by the dominant perspective as they confront stereotypes and bias (Boutte, 2008).

Critical readers have a heightened awareness that language and power influence the world (Freire, 2000) as they

work to unpack the text, the world, and their own biases. Critical literacy helps us "question how the world is and work toward more just images of what it might be" (Van Sluys, 2003, p. 401). Thus, reading becomes a social and political act allowing us to challenge the status quo. When we examine the role of power and positioning and consider alternate perspectives, we are positioned to adjust the lenses so that we can see more clearly, recognize our own biases, and work toward greater social justice.

PAUSE AND PONDER

- Reflect on your own educational experiences. Were you taught to read with a critical lens? If so, in what ways?
- In what ways do you question issues of power and privilege in text and in the world?
- How do you teach students to read with a critical lens?

Figure 1
Questions to Consider When Reading With a Critical Lens

- How does this text center certain ideas, values, or groups while marginalizing others?
- What does the author want me to think, feel, or believe?
- How might this text help me identify or challenge my perceptions and assumptions?
- How is this text attempting to influence my thinking about this topic?
- How does this text perpetuate stereotypes?
- Who does this text privilege? How is that privilege leveraged?
- Who is silenced or underrepresented in this text? What purpose is served by that omission?
- What is the counternarrative?

We aim to prepare students to use literacy as a tool to become engaged and empowered citizens who critically examine issues of power and privilege to advocate for equity, inclusion, and human rights. When students learn to read the word and the world with a critical stance, they begin to identify and examine problems, become more socially conscious, take action for social justice, and make a difference in their lives, in the community, and in the larger world around them (Vasquez, 2010).

Teaching with a critical lens is grounded in our individual classroom contexts and should be responsive to our students' needs, experiences, interests, and concerns. Thus, it varies based on the context in which it is being used as a perspective for teaching and learning (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Comber, Thompson, & Wells, 2001; Vasquez, 2004). Also, to do this work with students, we must first do the work ourselves.

Evelyn's Reflective Journey as a Preservice Teacher

When I learned about critical literacy in Katie's (first author) literacy methods course, I recalled an experience from a high school English class. When my teacher asked my opinion of a book, I answered in a very factual please-the-teacher manner. He asked why I believed the author of the book. Did I think the author had the authority to write on this subject? Did I believe the author's perspective? Did the author's way of viewing the world contradict my own? My thinking was transformed when I realized that readers do not have to accept the written word at face value. Reading had become an unconscious submission to the author's ideas, and I had never considered my right as a reader to disagree. Katie's literacy methods course helped me realize that bias, assumptions, and limited perspectives exist in all readers and in all texts, including those written for children. I realized that we should begin work with critical literacy even with young students, but that work must first begin with ourselves.

When I learned that part of critical literacy is recognizing that each of us is inherently biased, I began to explore my own biases and question their impact. I realized that no person or text is completely neutral. Each of us is shaped by our own experience of "normal," and confronting our own assumptions and biases can be scary. It caused me to question my right to help students confront their biases when I realized

that I am biased myself. As a young White woman from an affluent family, I perceive the world through my own privileged lens. Economic privilege created a rosy, sometimes naïve outlook on life. When I recognized how greatly this contrasted with the experiences of my students, I became concerned that I would not be able to connect with them. I worried that teaching them to read with a critical lens would take away from the required content and curriculum.

I came to the conclusion that approaching literacy through a critical lens is not a rejection of the standards. Rather, critical literacy empowers students to analyze, evaluate, and construct meaning through the very skills the standards mandate. Teaching students to read critically is essential because, as students come to understand that every writer brings bias and no text is neutral, they begin to read with a questioning spirit. They are empowered to challenge the writer and the writing, to search for the counternarrative, and to seek out the perspectives not shared. By teaching students to read the word and the world with a critical lens, we create a space where all voices can be valued and where students are empowered to take action for social justice.

From University Classroom to Second-Grade Classroom

In a literacy methods course, Katie (first author) engaged us in a critical discussion of *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. Knowing this beloved classic was a favorite of students, Katie helped us examine our biases by asking us to consider whose perspective is missing from the story. Specifically, she invited us to shift our focus from giving to taking. She also encouraged us to consider whose voice was not centered and how the inclusion of that voice might change the story. Originally thinking the theme was generosity, we began to see how the relationship between the boy and the tree was one-sided. We considered how that could be dangerous for caregivers and teachers and discussed the need for balance and self-care. We then worked in small groups to examine various books and draft lessons using a critical lens. I designed a series of lessons to guide the second graders in my practicum placement to unpack their biases and assumptions. These foundational lessons help young students develop important critical literacy skills needed for deeper exploration of issues related to power and privilege.

Lesson 1: Unpacking Our Assumptions

I selected *The Sandwich Swap* by Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan with Kelly DiPucchio (see Figure 2 for a list of additional suggested texts) to help students unpack their own assumptions. I designed the lesson to consider the question, “How might this text help me challenge my assumptions?” (see Figure 1). Inspired by Queen Rania’s own childhood experiences, *The Sandwich Swap* tells the story of two friends who make assumptions about each other’s lunch. Lily thinks Salma’s hummus and pita sandwich looks yucky, and Salma thinks Lily’s peanut butter and jelly sandwich looks gross. Soon, all of the students in the class join the sandwich showdown, and misinformed assumptions sweep the cafeteria. *The Sandwich Swap* offers opportunities to discuss the impact of assumptions, stereotypes, and bias when we experience different cultures.

Before reading, I revealed the contents of my own lunchbox. Students immediately declared that they would not eat my lunch because it looked gross. Then, I read the book and paused to explore the assumptions made by each character that led to a schoolwide food fight. I prompted students’ critical thinking about assumptions during and after the reading with think-alouds such as these:

- How does she know the sandwich is yucky or gross when she’s never tried it?

Figure 2
Suggested Children’s Literature

- *The Wall in the Middle of the Book* by Jon Agee
- *Hair Love* by Matthew A. Cherry
- *Mixed: A Colorful Story* by Arree Chung
- *Spaghetti in a Hot Dog Bun: Having the Courage to Be Who You Are* by Maria Dismondy
- *Red: A Crayon’s Story* by Michael Hall
- *The Bad Seed* by Jory John
- *Under My Hijab* by Hena Khan
- *Noodlephant* by Jacob Kramer
- *The Invisible Boy* by Trudy Ludwig
- *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales
- *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka
- *Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You* by Sonia Sotomayor
- *A Normal Pig* by K-Fai Steele
- *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation* by Duncan Tonatiuh
- *Introducing Teddy: A Gentle Story About Gender and Friendship* by Jessica Walton
- *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson

- Perhaps they are making assumptions that the sandwich will taste bad because it is not “normal” for them.
- Because we all are inherently biased, we can sometimes make assumptions about people or things, such as sandwiches. Have you ever assumed that something or someone was strange, bad, or scary before you tried it or got to know the person?

My plan was to discuss how judging someone based on their meal preferences was problematic, but students took the conversation in a different direction. They were focused on the notion of exclusion. Specifically, they were concerned about how the events in the book created a division between the characters and led the other students to choose sides. They asked questions such as these:

- Is it right to call anyone bad names, especially someone you care about?
- Is it fair to sit on the other side of the cafeteria from someone because they eat something different than you?
- Is it right to end a strong friendship over something petty and small?
- Is it nice to not play with someone?
- Is it right to join in on making fun of someone, rather than sticking up for them?

Students’ questions led to a deeper and more personal conversation than I had anticipated. The students reflected on their own experiences and recalled how it felt when they were called names or how they were hurt when someone did not defend them. Providing a safe space to discuss difficult experiences relevant to their own lives led to reflections and discussions about how they would change their actions moving forward.

When reflecting on this lesson, I was confronted by my own biases. I planned and facilitated what I believed to be a meaningful discussion on how our assumptions influence the way we treat others, assuming my students would find the judgments about our lunch choices to be of momentous importance. In doing so, I unconsciously predetermined the “right” answer to our discussion. The students’ reactions to the story and their comments helped me challenge my own assumptions. What I realized is that, just like me, each student’s background and experiences influenced the way they made meaning from the text and the world around them. I learned the important lesson to shift my role as the teacher

to one as a co-learner. By creating a space where students can react naturally and speak freely, we can co-construct meaning rather than setting an agenda and expected outcomes of the lesson.

Lesson 2: Overcoming the Wall

In the first lesson, the goal was to examine biases and assumptions made by others. In this second lesson, students were prompted to look inward and examine their own biases. I selected *The Wall in the Middle of the Book* by Jon Agee to help us unpack our biases and assumptions. This story features a little boy dressed as a knight who is separated from an unknown world by a wall positioned literally in the middle of the book. On one side of the wall, we see a little boy dressed in armor. On the adjacent page, we see fierce-looking animals and a mean-looking ogre. The little boy's perspective leads him to make assumptions that the other side of the wall is dangerous. As the story unfolds, the boy's side becomes unsafe and the ogre on the other side saves his life. This book provides a powerful example of how quickly we make assumptions when our perspective is limited and shows that our worldview can expand when we consider the full picture.

Before reading, I piqued students' curiosity by hiding behind a trifold poster-board "wall." The students were both confused and humored. I frontloaded the reading by explaining that I was nervous about coming to school after missing a day and did not know what to expect on my return, so I built a wall and hid behind it because I knew my little corner of the room would be safe. I expressed that this was an assumption I was making, which led to a review of vocabulary including *assumption*, *bias*, and *critical reader*. I then connected my physical wall to the one in the book and shared the goal of questioning the text during our reading. I asked students to consider what the author wanted us to think, feel, or believe (see Figure 1 for sample questions).

After reading, we discussed how the author and illustrator positioned the reader to have access to perspectives from both sides of the wall and how the little boy's limited perspective led him to make assumptions. We discussed how easy it is to make assumptions, that anyone can make assumptions (including us), and that it takes careful thinking to avoid this trap. I asked a student to sit on one side of the trifold poster-board wall while the rest of my students made a semicircle, allowing them to see both sides. I placed a stuffed animal on the other side and

asked the student, with his eyes closed, to describe the stuffed animal. Was it nice? What did it look like? Would you spend time with it? Would you play with it? He was unable to accurately depict the stuffed animal because of his limited perspective. This activity offered a concrete way for the students to think about the notion of assumptions and bias.

Next, students responded to the book in writing. Some wrote a summary, and others wrote their own version of the story. Students considered how the author can position readers. One student wrote a story about a fairy on one side of the wall who was perceived to be evil by the boy on the other side of the wall. What the boy did not know, however, was that the fairy had the power to turn winter into spring. When winter arrived on his side of the wall, he found himself in great danger. The supposedly ill-willed and mean-spirited fairy saved him from his impending doom, proving herself to be kindhearted and empathetic despite the boy's preconceived notion of her. This student's story demonstrated his understanding of how our limited perspectives may lead us to make assumptions.

As readers, we may easily cast judgment on the little knight in the story because we view the situation with a full perspective. However, every day we succumb to making assumptions about others behind our own "wall" of biases. In the third lesson, I continued to explore the notion of learning alongside the students as we worked to unpack our biases of what it means to be bad.

Lesson 3: Exploring What It Means to Be "Bad"

For this lesson, I selected *The Bad Seed* by Jory John. As I considered the question "How might this text help me challenge my assumptions?" (see Figure 1), I grappled with whether doing bad things makes us a bad person or whether our actions can be independent from, rather than entangled with, who we are. My apprehension to approach a question I could not answer myself almost stopped me from asking it. Rather than abandoning my lesson, I was honest with my students and acknowledged that I do not have all the answers. I created a space for us to explore the notion of being bad. I found that honesty was powerful in cultivating an inclusive discussion, particularly from my own position as the teacher. I found myself no longer guiding students toward my "correct" beliefs and truths and instead tussling with the notion of right versus wrong alongside them.

To introduce the reading, I used the Talking Drawing strategy (Wood, Taylor, & Stover, 2015) and asked the students to illustrate what it means to be “bad.” This activity drew upon students’ background knowledge and gave me insight into their thinking. Many students illustrated an action, such as pushing, stealing, or saying unkind words. We then discussed whether the harmful actions depicted in our drawings made someone a bad person.

To encourage an honest and open discussion, I positioned myself as a co-learner engaged in the critical conversation. We began by considering our opinions based on our perspectives. Before reading, I asked students to consider whether we can do something bad but still have good in our heart. We reviewed our emerging definitions of assumption and bias created when reading *The Sandwich Swap* and *The Wall in the Middle of the Book*. We collectively defined assumptions as judgments that we make about something or someone before we have a full understanding of them. Bias comes from our personal experiences. It is our background, what we have lived and what we have not lived, that prompts us to make assumptions. We then discussed how critical readers are aware of their biases and the biases of others (including authors). I explained how we were already making assumptions about the character based on the illustration on the cover and the title of *The Bad Seed*.

This story, told in a humorous manner with vibrant illustrations, engages readers while offering opportunities to discuss bias and assumptions. As we read the story, we discussed that although the Bad Seed was working hard to be good, others still viewed him as bad based on their preconceived assumptions. The other seeds and nuts never knew what happened to the Bad Seed in the past. They examined his present actions without seeking to understand why he acted the way he did. I explained that sometimes we assign labels without knowing the complete story. Now, not only were students wondering whether the Bad Seed was truly bad, they were also grappling with why the other seeds limited their view of him.

This led to a discussion of the counternarrative. The students connected with how their opinion of the wolf in the story of the Three Little Pigs changed when we read *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka. They then considered *The Bad Seed* from the perspective of the Bad Seed to challenge their assumptions. When considering how the Bad

Seed felt when he overheard the others calling him bad, one student commented,

The seed had good feelings on the inside, but he didn’t actually show it on the outside. At the beginning he was nice, but towards the middle he became bad because he changed, but then he started to be nice again.

After reading and discussing the book, students revisited their initial Talking Drawing depiction of being bad and wrote reflective statements to describe how their thinking had changed and how it may influence their future actions. When asked about his drawing, one student shared, “I am working on showing how he is also being good, like I may put a heart in his hand. I may also put a halo on him.” This demonstrates the students’ developing understanding of the character from one-dimensional to more complex.

Although the drawings were an opportunity for students to examine their initial assumptions, the reflection statements nudged students to consider the implications of our discussion in the real world. The intended outcome of the lesson was to empower students to create change after unpacking their biases. Social action and the work of critical literacy go hand in hand. We do a great injustice if we facilitate these kinds of discussions but leave our students without the “so what?”

Reflections

As Evelyn reflected on her critical literacy journey as a preservice teacher, she recognized her own growth in addition to her students’ learning. She realized the importance of examining her own biases and assumptions. Even with the most sincere intentions, her definitions of terms and even pacing and lesson structure allowed her beliefs to inevitably seep into her teaching. Growing up, she did not experience hardship or exclusion. Although she hates to admit it, she relates to the knight from *The Wall in the Middle of the Book*, making assumptions with little to no credible knowledge informing her beliefs. Through this journey, Evelyn recognized that she is only just beginning the work of unpacking her biases and helping students do the same. She knows that she cannot completely shed all of her biases and assumptions when she enters her future classroom, but she acknowledges the importance for ongoing learning.

We invite you to engage in this work yourself before implementing with your students. Our biases are often unconscious, and we must actively work

to recognize and unpack them. To begin, you might consider a time when you met someone new or experienced something unfamiliar. What was that like? How did you feel? Then, reflect on biases you may have held about your students and their families. Have you ever made assumptions about a student's abilities or behaviors based on preconceived notions? When considering yourself as a reader, how diverse are the books you read? How often do you read without questioning the text or the author? Do you seek the counternarrative?

Now, consider the books you read with students. We encourage you to gather a small collection of books you return to frequently. Examine each title with a critical lens to determine which ideas, values, or groups are centered or marginalized. What does this suggest for making additions to your collection? Then, go a bit deeper and examine your classroom library to determine who is reflected and who is unseen. Does the collection reflect life in your neighborhood, faith tradition, value system, culture, politics, and so forth? Where do you see gaps and needs to make the collection more diverse and relevant for your students and the broader society? How diverse are the perspectives and experiences in the books you share with students? Do you actively encourage them to consider counternarratives? Do you seek other truths? Do you dispel myths and misconceptions?

Final Thoughts

The goal is for students of all ages to be able to peel back the layers of text to uncover issues of power and privilege, to disrupt the commonplace, and to examine bias. When we teach students to move beyond passive acceptance of the word and the world, they learn that there is more to the story that has often been overlooked because of bias. Even at a young age, students can confront these biases, explore the counternarratives, and take action to make a difference in the world (Laminack & Kelly, 2019).

As educators, we have great power as we make decisions about what we include and exclude in our curriculum, in the books we select for read-alouds, and in the ways in which we position ourselves and our students as learners. That power comes with the responsibility for the ethical decisions we make as we enact critical literacy practices with students (Harste & Vasquez, 2018). Through her practicum teaching experience, Evelyn unpacked her own biases and assumptions about teaching and learning. She

reflected on the power dynamics between the teacher and the students, including her assumptions about lesson outcomes. Through her critical consciousness, she realized the need to embrace a more reciprocal model of teaching where she positioned herself as a learner alongside the students, rather than a teacher-centered banking method where the teacher is the expert dispenser of knowledge (Freire, 2000). In this way, students' voices and knowledge are valued and students have a greater sense of agency in their learning.

Providing a space for students to explore issues such as bias as they read the word and the world does not compromise literacy skills outlined in educational standards. Rather, students connect with texts on a greater level and use those skills to create pathways to engaging with themes, beyond just understanding the story line. Further, critical literacy empowers students to want to continue reading. Innately curious and motivated, students are driven to read other books and continue the discussion.

If we are to engage students in critical literacy practices, we must first do this work ourselves as educators. Thus, it is necessary for teacher education programs to provide learning opportunities. This learning should be ongoing throughout our careers and in our daily lives. By including books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop,

TAKE ACTION!

1. Begin by doing this work yourself as a reader.
2. Use some of the guiding questions in Figure 1 to help you unpack text with a critical lens.
3. Read with these questions in mind to examine issues of power and privilege.
4. Consider how your thinking and perspectives have changed because of what you have read.
5. Share this thinking with your students.
6. Curate a collection of texts (e.g., those in Figure 2) to read with your students using a critical lens.
7. Engage students in critical conversations using the guiding questions from Figure 1.
8. Continue this work and embed it into your regular teaching practices.
9. Encourage students to curate a collection to launch a critical examination of a topic or issue they find important.

1990), we can help students unpack bias and expand their understanding of themselves, others, and the larger world. With a critical lens, students learn to question the text and the world as they consider the role of power and privilege. From this perspective, students become empowered to make informed decisions, to challenge injustice they encounter, and to take action as informed citizens of the world.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

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- Implicit bias tests at Harvard University: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- Social Justice Books: <https://socialjusticebooks.org>
- Teaching Tolerance: <https://www.tolerance.org>
- We Need Diverse Books: <https://diversebooks.org>

