

5.7 “Can We Read this One?” A Conversation About Book Selection in Kindergarten

Larissa Hsia-Wong

Connections to *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*

- Chapter 6: Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners
- Chapter 9: Teaching to Enhance Each Child’s Development and Learning
- Chapter 10: Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum to Achieve Meaningful Goals

Case Overview

In this case I explore critical literacy’s assertion (Freire & Macedo 1987) that children can and should be equipped with the tools and strategies to critique, challenge, and disrupt dominant and racist narratives, discourses, and ideologies, and how this relates to several of the early literacy principles of developmentally appropriate practice. In this example, I integrate the developmentally appropriate practice of creating a culturally responsive literacy curriculum through read-aloud book selection with two kindergarten children. Critical literacy is “an evolving repertoire of practices of analysis and interrogation which move between the micro features of texts and the macro conditions of institutions, focusing upon how relations of power work through these practices” (Comber 2013, 589). (See “Critical Literacy” at 136.) The case narrative specifically focuses on the parts of the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice that highlight choosing curricular materials and resources that serve as windows and mirrors to build on each child’s funds of knowledge. Books that serve as windows encourage children to see into the lives of those who live and identify differently from them; books that serve as mirrors reflect a child’s own life, identity, and experiences.

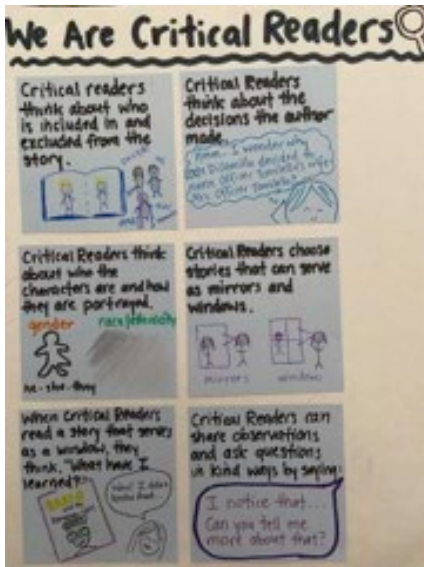
Prior to the conversation captured below, our class had done extensive work on understanding and unpacking identity around gender, race, and ability. Creating a classroom grounded in anti-bias pedagogy begins on the first day of school and consists of embracing critical discussions; creating a learning environment that honors children’s questions and stories; and committing and modeling continuous personal critical self-reflection to identify my own biases, blind spots, and understandings I need to unlearn. At this point in the year, the children and I have already engaged in many conversations about how books can serve as windows and mirrors. Part of these lessons and discussions include teaching and modeling possible sentence stems, or starters, for children to use as they share their thinking about books, such as “I identify as . . . The character identifies as . . .” and “I notice that the author/character . . . It makes me wonder . . .”

Learning Objectives

1. Identify ways to plan authentic curriculum experiences that build on children’s funds of knowledge.
2. Describe ways to incorporate the components of play (choice, wonder, and delight) during academic conversations with children.

Case Narrative

After helping Otto and Casey, this week's Library Liaisons, tidy up the classroom library, Ms. Larissa invites them to choose the class's read-aloud books for later in the week. In the following exchange with the two children, Ms. Larissa refers to the classroom's READ-O board. (The READ-O board is, inspired by BING-O reading sheets that encourage children to read a wider variety of books. It contains descriptors that intentionally focus on author and character identity and encourages children to choose and read a diverse range of picture books during read-aloud times.) Whenever the class reads a book that meets a



READ-O square, they add a sticky note to the board with the book's title. The critical reader poster referred to below is an anchor chart on critical reading that highlights six minilessons that guide children when thinking and talking about books (see the photo at left).

"Let's look at our critical reader poster and our READ-O board," Ms. Larissa says while gesturing to the two resources. "What books do you think we should read next as a class?"

After taking some time to browse through the book bins, Otto and Casey share their suggestions.

"Ooh, I think we should read this one," Otto says enthusiastically, holding up a copy of *Change Sings* by Amanda Gorman.

"What draws you to that book, Otto?" Ms. Larissa asks.

"I noticed the main character seems to identify as Black and on READ-O, it looks like it's time for us to read a book with a character who identifies as Black so we can learn more. Well, at least for me I could learn more because this book will be a window for me," Otto says, using several previously taught sentence frames.

"Great idea! It will be a window for me too! What are you thinking about, Casey?"

"Can we read this one?" Casey asks, holding up a copy of *Goldy Luck and the Three Pandas* by Natasha Yim.

"What interests you in that book, Casey?" Ms. Larissa asks.

"It looks really funny and, also, I think it is about Chinese New Year. See this page? There's a *hongbao* (red envelope), and my family is getting ready to celebrate it soon. And maybe after we read it, I can share some things I know too?" he asked, looking at Ms. Larissa expectantly.

"I love that!" Ms. Larissa says.

"Don't you celebrate Chinese New Year too? Maybe you can share too!" Casey says to Ms. Larissa.

"I do celebrate it, but now I'm too old to get hongbao, heh! And you know what, Casey? I've learned to call it 'Lunar New Year' because the festival is celebrated by many people and not all of them identify as Chinese," Ms. Larissa explains.

"You mean, it's kind of like how we can't just think everyone celebrates Christmas and just say 'Merry Christmas?'" Otto asks.

"Oh yeah, I remember! We can't do assumptions!" Casey chimes in.

"Exactly, we want to make sure we don't *make* assumptions about anyone's identity and that the words we use make everyone feel included," Ms. Larissa explains. "Casey, I love your idea about how we can invite people to share afterward!"

"Yeah! That would be so cool!" Otto says to Casey. "Part of my family celebrates it too, the part that comes from Malaysia."

"Malaysia? I didn't know they celebrated it too. Wow!" exclaims Casey.

“I can’t wait to learn how your family in Malaysia celebrates the Lunar New Year. I can tell we are all going to get a chance to learn a lot from each other. These are great book suggestions, friends. Thank you for your help! I can’t wait for our class to read them together!”

Takeaways and Next Steps

As a teacher of young children, I often feel the need to have everything planned, to direct all of our classroom and learning interactions (especially those with more serious and complex topics, such as identity and racism), and to have all of the right answers. However, my experience with Otto and Casey reminds me of the profound and authentic learning and growth opportunities that stepping back can provide. Giving Otto and Casey the opportunity and agency to choose our next read-aloud books allows me to connect with them in a way I might have missed. Giving them the space to build on their relationship with each other that centers their identities and their experiences enables them to connect in a more personal yet unforced way. The experience encourages me to think of how else I can follow children’s leads and build in more opportunities for them to share authentically about themselves and learn from others. When joyful curiosity is expressed and nurtured, the bonds and connections between children and teachers become stronger, and the classroom becomes a true community grounded in authentic relationships that supports the growth of each individual.

Contrary to popular belief that they are too young and thus are incapable of engaging in complex and meaningful discussions, research shows that young children can comprehend complex issues such as race and racism (Fontanella-Nothom 2019; Piper 2019). Young children notice differences early on and pick up and internalize stereotypes and dominant narratives if these are not intentionally pointed out and discussed. Teachers who discuss these critical issues in an intentional way and honor children’s knowledge and meaning making can help all children create a caring culture in which all selves and identities are embraced. Additionally, engaging young children in critical discussions on race provides them with cognitive, linguistic, and social models to identify, dismantle, and challenge biased and unjust ideas and information. Creating opportunities in which children can express and articulate their identities, learn about how others may identify, ask questions, and engage in dialogue at a younger age to develop their critical literacies is advantageous. As Vasquez, Janks, and Comber (2019) remind us, there is no one right way to engage in critical literacy; rather, it is most important for individual teachers to create our own way with our own voices.

Case Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important to help children develop critical literacy? Draw on specifics from the case narrative.
2. In what ways does Ms. Larissa employ principle 6 of the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice?
3. In what ways does Ms. Larissa plan a curriculum experience that builds on the funds of knowledge of Otto and Casey to offer culturally and linguistically sustaining literacy experiences?
4. Based on the discussion that Ms. Larissa has with Otto and Casey, what are some specific strategies, materials, or activities she could use to follow up on this conversation with the rest of the class?
5. Although this conversation does not take place during a play-based scenario, in what ways are the components of play (choice, wonder, and delight) integrated into the conversation?
6. Was Ms. Larissa’s explanation of the term *Lunar New Year* necessary? How else could she have responded to the children to further develop their critical literacies in ways that are both child responsive and culturally responsive?

General Discussion Questions

1. What are some other ways teachers can incorporate meaningful and authentic conversations around complex curricular concepts such as identity, bias, and racism?
2. How can the framework of viewing books as windows and mirrors support identity-based conversations in a classroom? What might be some challenges or limitations to this approach?

References

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Critical Literacy

Critical literacy maintains that all texts, as products of social, political, and cultural contexts, inherently deal with power and can serve as potential sites for transformation and liberation (Freire & Macedo 1987; Luke & Freebody 1999). Therefore, a critical literacy approach in a classroom creates opportunities for students to acquire the tools and strategies to critically examine texts, identify and problematize dominant narratives and discourses, and consider how the language of the texts perpetuates hegemonic ideologies (Street 2001). Proponents of critical literacy maintain that literacy education cannot be simply limited to teaching functional literacy skills; it must also include the skills and strategies to dismantle inequitable and oppressive systems of power.