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## Collaborative Inquiry to Support Critically Reading Children's Literature

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## Collaborative Inquiry to Support Critically Reading Children's Literature

### Cover Page Footnote

We deeply appreciate the time and perspectives of our teacher participants. This work would not be possible without their willingness to open up their practice and share their thinking with us.

# Collaborative Inquiry to Support Critically Reading Children's Literature

LAURIE RABINOWITZ AND AMY TONDREAU

Choosing what to read aloud to students in 2021 is hard. In this current moment where inequity has been laid bare by the dual pandemics of coronavirus and racism, as well as the inequitable access to education further exacerbated by remote learning, decisions about which texts to use with your class feel more important than ever. Teachers know that well-selected children's literature provides an opportunity to introduce complex topics to their students and to provide children with mirrors of themselves and windows into other worlds (Sims-Bishop, 1990). But, they may feel unprepared or uncomfortable facilitating text-based conversations about issues of social justice.

In an effort to honor and value the multiple identities of all students, both the publishing industry and the education community have placed increased emphasis on curating classroom libraries with a more diverse range of characters and authors (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2020). While this is a great first step in infusing literacy instruction with equity-pedagogy, it is only a first step. Too often, teachers emphasize analysis of the craft moves, story elements, and structures in well-selected, diverse children's literature, rather than discussing the social justice issues in these texts. Or, one story to represent an identity becomes a single, often negative story (e.g. stories that represent Black American experiences, but only center times of oppression) (Thomas, 2016).

In order to take the next step, teachers need the pedagogy to do critical literacy work with children. Tschida, et al. (2014) have argued for moving beyond only attending to Sims-Bishop's (1990) "windows and mirrors." They call for pairing thoughtful text representation with Adichie's (2009) notion of disrupting the single story. To do so, teachers need to know what to critically read texts for. In other words, they must develop their own critical literacy practices, such as

questioning power and positioning or identifying assumptions and multiple perspectives. Unfortunately, it is often assumed that this part of this process - doing a thoughtful critical reading - is a skill that educators already have.

With this in mind, we conducted a study on how K-5 classroom teachers describe their beliefs, concerns, and planning process for enacting read alouds featuring characters with disabilities. Our study took place in the context of the summer of 2020, in the midst of both the global Coronavirus pandemic and a national uprising for racial justice. We explored educators' close reading of picture books to elicit the unpacking of beliefs about individuals with disabilities conveyed by literature. We sought to understand their thinking about how to enact these read alouds. What we discovered through our own research is that teachers could benefit from developing skill in applying the conceptual tools to critically read for multiple identities; while the teachers who participated in our study felt comfortable addressing some identities such as gender, they were less comfortable addressing disability identities.

Many newer educators are products of literacy instruction aligned to the Common Core State standards, which, in emphasizing close reading (CCSS Initiative, 2020; Coleman & Pimentel, 2012), has the consequence of de-emphasizing the reader's "own perspective, background, and biases in order to uncover the author's meaning in the text" (Ferguson, 2014). Literacy educators who learned to read with this approach may have had fewer opportunities to engage in critical literacy practices (Tondreau & Rabinowitz, 2021). In addition, the majority of teachers in the United States are white, female, and middle class (ourselves included) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), which often means we operate with an unconscious set of privileges that may make it challenging to see stereotypes, assumptions, or bias present in texts, and are unpracticed at having conversations about



Figure 1. Credit [Alexis Brown](#).

racism and classism. In short, it is quite challenging to do critical literacy work with students without developing the skills on one's own; as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) argued, it has long been assumed that "teachers who know more teach better" (p. 249). When teachers are more comfortable with deconstructing texts, they feel more prepared to consistently implement this type of reading in their classrooms.

### Background of the Study

As teacher educators of elementary teachers, we noticed an area of need when it came to our students planning and enacting critical readings of children's literature in their classrooms. Laurie teaches literacy coursework focused on supporting students with disabilities and supervises literacy masters students in their fieldwork experience in the northeastern United States and Amy teaches undergraduate and graduate literacy methods courses to pre-service and in-service teachers in the southeastern United States. Together, we conducted design-based research (Reinking & Bradley, 2008) that explored the following research question: how do K-5 teachers describe their beliefs, concerns, and planning process for enacting read alouds featuring characters with disabilities?

### Methodology

Data was collected from three early- to mid-career educators who attend the same graduate school of education in a northeastern city. Phoebe is a reading specialist in a

progressive urban independent school and has taught for 11 years. Prior to this job, she was a special education teacher at a charter school in a neighboring city. Melissa is a third-year special education teacher who teaches in the primary grades at an independent school for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. She has also co-taught and worked as a special education service provider. Claire is an eighth-year teacher teaching in an upper elementary grade at a suburban independent school. She previously worked as a general education teacher in an integrated co-teaching classroom at a charter school in a city. Claire self-identified as dyslexic during her interview. All three participants identify as white women, two as Jewish.

Data collection spanned June to August of 2020. Prior to the data collection process, participants completed a literacy graduate class taught by Laurie during the Spring 2020 academic semester. During the course, students were asked to select and critically read a text featuring a character with a reading disability. Students wrote a paper analyzing the text and then shared parts of their analysis with small groups in class. Each participant was interviewed to reflect on their graduate school project analyzing a children's literature text and refer back to specific moments in the paper; we also conducted an artifact review. A focus group was utilized for follow up questions and discussion of themes. During the focus group, participants also worked together to analyze a picture book and plan how to use it in their classrooms.

### Findings and Implications

The experience of facilitating the focus group highlighted for us that even teachers who were committed to engaging students in discussion of social justice topics found doing the critical close reading of the picture book that represented a character with a disability to be challenging. Based on our research, we found that the use of a facilitation protocol was helpful to engage teachers in a discussion that enhanced their critical reading of a piece of children's literature. Initially, teachers found it difficult to transfer their critical understanding of one identity category (ie. race) to another (ie. disability), and the steps of the protocol and the "social capital" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leana 2011) of other group members proved beneficial for deeper analysis. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) social capital is the talent of a whole group of educators rather than the skills and knowledge of individual teachers. They go on to argue that

social capital actually increases (individual) human capital because, “[i]ndividuals get confidence, learning, and feedback from having the right kind of people and the right kinds of interactions and relationships around them” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 4). We build upon this work to contend that working in small groups with colleagues is a promising practice that can support translating critical literacy work into educators’ pre-existing reading units of study.

### Promising Practice: Collaborative Inquiry as Social Justice Professional Development

Inquiry groups, with an emphasis on teacher collaboration, have been posited as a primary mechanism for schools to disrupt the historical isolation of teaching. Practitioner inquiry positions communities as both the means to achieve particular long-term goals as well as ends in and of themselves. The community becomes a merger of teachers’ individual human capital and the social capital of the community (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Practitioner inquiry requires sufficient time and duration, discourse of rich, descriptive talk and writing, and a sense of purpose to make consequential change. All of the work of an inquiry community is ultimately in service of a broader aim:

“enhancing educators’ sense of social responsibility and social action in the service of a democratic society” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 58). Through explicit or implicit links to larger movements of social justice and change, practitioner inquiry works toward an equity agenda through a deep commitment to students’ learning, broadly defined. As we saw in our own study, teachers sharpen their own critical literacy skills to bring into the classroom through dialogue about social issues in picture books with colleagues. Below, we offer a collaborative inquiry cycle that groups of teachers can replicate to critically read children’s literature for different social justice issues (see Table 1). Throughout our description of the stages, we share quotes from our study participants that illustrate their experiences participating in collaborative inquiry focused on critically reading picture books for representation of individuals with disabilities.

### Preparing for the Group Meetings

To get started with group meetings to critically read children’s literature, educators can gather their grade team colleagues or fellow English Language Arts instructors together and identify five to six times to meet. When we conducted our research, the teachers said that this study marked the first time that they had been asked to critically

**Table 1**  
*Collaborative Inquiry Cycle*

Phase	Description
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Choose a social justice lens (e.g. race, disability, social class, etc.).</li> <li>Choose a children’s book to critically read.</li> <li>Choose a facilitator.</li> <li>Prepare critical questions.</li> <li>Read the chosen book.</li> </ul>
Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meet as a group.</li> <li>Facilitator poses critical questions.</li> <li>Use the chosen social justice lens to discuss text.</li> <li>Brainstorm how to facilitate this critical reading with students.</li> <li>Pick structure to try out lesson and intervisitation (e.g. lesson study, partnerships, video observations, etc.).</li> </ul>
Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Volunteer(s) teach brainstormed critical read aloud.</li> <li>Intervisitations take place.</li> </ul>
Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflect on the critical read aloud as a group.</li> <li>Brainstorm implications for future teaching practice.</li> <li>Set teaching goals to continue critical read alouds.</li> <li>Restart collaborative inquiry cycle with a new social justice lens.</li> </ul>

read a children's book. They appreciated doing the critical read with colleagues because the process highlighted stereotypes and assumptions that they did not notice on their own. For example, Phoebe shared, "What was really interesting was talking with others...the different things that they analyzed were really interesting...I didn't even think about that...or I didn't even think to analyze in that context. [Another teacher] took an intersectional approach...that's really interesting to think about." Claire added to this point in saying, "I think that every person who is going to be a teacher should go through some sort of exercise like this...I think that you can make educated decisions about what books to use and what might not be the best fit."

To prepare for your own group meetings, be sure to choose a facilitator. This person can lead all of your meetings, or you can have each teacher take a turn facilitating. Before the first meeting, the whole group should determine which children's book they will read. It is preferable that each participant has their own copy of the text; you might want to choose a book that is already in everyone's classroom library if your school does not have extra funds to purchase a new book. You will also want to select an identity lens (e.g. race, class, gender, linguistic background, disability, etc.) for critical analysis. In our study, our focus group read with the lens of disability and we selected *Hello Goodbye Dog* by Maria Gianferrari, which is a picture book about a girl with a disability and her relationship with her pet dog. Other texts we have used in this work include *My Three Best Friends and Me*, *Zulay* by Cari Best (2015), *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña (2014), *Emmanuel's Dream* by Laurie Ann Thompson (2015), and *A Boy and A Jaguar* by Alan Rabinowitz (2014). There are also excellent book lists that can be found for the Schneider Family Book Award, Disability in KidLit, and Raising Luminaries (see References for websites).

Everyone should read the selected children's book before meeting and the facilitator should take some time to prepare a few examples of critical questions they might ask about the text. In our focus group, we had a disability lens in mind, but did not provide participants with questions to guide their initial reading of the text. The findings from our study and our ongoing work suggest that posing critical questions in advance could enrich the discussion by guiding participants to focus more closely on the lens for analysis rather than talking about the literacy skills and strategies that could be taught through the book. Some potential questions that we suggest posing include the following:

- Are characters with disabilities excluded/included in the same environment as other characters?
- Is a character's disability a problem that needs to be overcome?
- Does someone else solve the problem for the character with disabilities?
- Do characters need to learn kindness to help a person with a disability?

For a list of additional discussion questions, see Tondreau and Rabinowitz (2021).

### Critically Reading the Children's Book

At your first group meeting, you will want to engage critically with the selected children's literature text. The facilitator might begin by sharing the critical questions that they brainstormed in advance; this provides a focus for the work of the group. Then, other educators can add their own questions to the list. In our research, teacher participants found that having a set of critical questions to help guide their reading allowed them to see stereotypes present in the children's literature that they may not have otherwise seen. For instance, Claire explained, "I think using...[the question list] provided...was very helpful and made me think. [It] helped me and gave me a guiding sense of what I was looking for."

After exploring the questions together, the facilitator can invite the group into two rounds of reflection. First, the group can silently revisit the children's book and reflect on what they notice, react to, or question as readers. The group can then share these reflections by giving each participant two-minutes of uninterrupted airtime to speak. By actively listening as others share, participants can gain a better understanding of the text. While it is often teachers' first instinct to begin lesson planning right away or to begin by thinking about how to use the text in the classroom, it is important that they take the time to respond to the text as a reader first to examine not only the complexities and nuances of the text, but also their own reactions to it.

We suggest reserving some time to talk as a group after each participant has shared in order to answer the critical questions generated previously. In our research, allowing the educators time to talk about the story as readers allowed for the unpacking of the unconscious stereotypes and assumptions that they were bringing to their own readings of the text. For example, Melissa explained her response to *Hello Goodbye Dog* as follows, "I completely was assuming that the



entire time, it's a therapy dog. You could easily go through the story without even addressing that. If we're not analyzing it, right? Now, I realize it's her dog...just her dog." Here Melissa identifies that she brought an assumption to the text about individuals with disabilities: the single story that individuals with disabilities are not independent—specifically, that if an individual who uses a wheelchair has a dog, it must be a service animal—and that the text disrupts that expectation. The group conversation helped her to see the single story, name it, and challenge her thinking about narrative.

Once teachers have read the story and unpacked some of their assumptions about the text, the facilitator can invite the group to consider how they might teach the text. They can brainstorm what questions they would ask about the text as well as what themes, ideas and discussions they might foster by reading it with their class. In our research, Phoebe reflected on revisiting *Thank You, Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco which tells the story of a student with a reading disability. Though she had used this text in her classroom before, the process of critically reading with a disability lens gave her new ideas for how to teach the book to her students.

I think this is still a good text that you could use with students. But, similar to what I was talking about before and thinking about the messaging...[like] how might it feel if you have a disability and you don't have the support of your classmates and your teachers. Also...asking them, what do you think of the fact that... Mr. Falker helps Trisha? Like what are the positives of that? I would want them to get to a place of, yes, a teacher helps support her and gets her to read. But look, what are the things that Trisha does for herself? She also owns her learning and how do we own our own learning? Trying to help them analyze how Trisha could take control of that...you [could] write a different ending or another book where the ending is about Trisha. I want them to think a little more critically about that.

As Phoebe explains, after reflecting on the messages about reading disability present in Polacco's text herself, she would still use this text in her classroom. But, her plan for how to engage with the text has changed. She now wants to encourage her students, many of whom identify as having reading disabilities, to recognize and disrupt the single story that a teacher needs to "save" you for you to become a good reader. She describes a lesson where students can identify the problematic narrative, recognize other ways that they can see Trisha, the child with the disability, as whole, and even push

back on that narrative by rewriting the ending to make it center on Trisha, rather than on the impact of her teacher.

Since doing critical work can be daunting, it can also be helpful in this round of discussion to consider potential challenges that might arise in using this text with students. Melissa shared an example of a time she felt unprepared to address the content of a book with a student, explaining:

I actually didn't know [the book] contained so much explicit terminology like explaining, 'I have an extra chromosome.' I didn't know if I'd be able to explain and answer the questions that the student was having. Like, can I explain what the author means by that?

As shown in Melissa's quote, the reflection time allows teachers to identify what social justice issues they are and are not comfortable with discussing in their classrooms. Claire shared her comfort discussing issues of race and racism in the classroom, in comparison to her earlier hesitation about addressing mental health issues with her students:

Maybe it is a comfort level. Like, I feel comfortable talking about race and the injustices in our world revolving around race. So like buying... a kids book for racism, maybe just didn't feel intimidating to me. But, if you ask someone who's not as comfortable talking about race in their classroom, maybe that would feel uncomfortable for them. But now that I'm reevaluating it, maybe I should find children's books where...[a]... child has some anxiety.

In her reflection, Claire identifies a social justice issue that she was comfortable discussing with students (racism) and one she was not comfortable discussing (mental health). She exhibits an evolving willingness to include texts that represent individuals with mental health needs that stems from her experiences discussing the representation of individuals with disabilities in the focus group. The group discussion opens up a space to develop comfort, fluency, and skill with lenses the teachers were previously uncomfortable with.

Similar to the reflection process discussed above, we recommend first allowing each teacher to share their thinking without interruption before opening up dialogic discussion for the whole group. It can even be helpful to encourage participants to take low-inference notes using a shared format such as Google Documents or chart paper. These notes may serve as a tool to capture what each individual says encouraging active listening and allowing the group to develop a sense of larger patterns. You should continue your work together by planning a read aloud using the text that



<b>Table 2</b> <i>Critical Questions Anchor Chart</i>		
<b>Character</b>	<b>Plot</b>	<b>Word Choice</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who tells the story?</li> <li>Is the character with a disability a rounded character?</li> <li>Who has power in the story?</li> <li>Is a character with a disability seen as a burden?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are the main events centered on a non-disabled character taking care of a disabled character?</li> <li>Does someone else speak for a character with disabilities?</li> <li>Do characters with disabilities help others?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are the words positive or negative?</li> <li>Does the author avoid naming the disability (e.g. special, differently-abled)?</li> <li>Is the language too simple?</li> <li>Is the language condescending?</li> </ul>

you just critically read (see Kesler et al., 2019 for an example of a social justice read aloud). You may wish to draw from Table 2 to create an anchor chart to offer critical guiding questions for students.

Select one teacher who is willing to try this lesson out in their classroom and plan with those students in mind. The read aloud should have a before, during, and after reading structure. Before reading you will want to make sure that students have an understanding of the identity lens and related vocabulary. You want to ensure that you infuse critical questions with a focus on the identity lens that you have selected throughout the during-reading portion of the lesson. This will allow you to have a rich critical conversation with the class after reading.

### Facilitating the Critical Read Aloud

There are several ways to approach trying out the critical read aloud that the group has planned. One way may be to use a lesson study cycle (Lewis et al., 2004). One teacher might facilitate the lesson, inviting the other educators to observe her teaching and take low-inference notes. The group could then meet after the lesson was taught to discuss what worked and what they might do differently. Another approach might be to have teachers partner up and observe one another teaching the lesson before meeting as a group to discuss successes and areas for improvement. Video observations might also be used if it is hard to coordinate the timing for classroom intervisitation.

If time allows, the group might plan a new lesson based on what was learned through any of the processes mentioned above. Each teacher can try it out in their own classroom, making variations to meet the learning needs of their own students. For example, Phoebe shared her experience of trying

a read aloud in her classroom, saying “Let me just try this out and kinda see how [the critical questioning] goes...But being able to just kinda hear [the students’] feedback on like, Well, what’s going on...and what do you think of this? And that was interesting to hear.” An additional round of lesson planning and teaching can help transfer the use of critical literacy practices into everyone’s read alouds.

### Reflecting on Process

Summing up this process with a final group reflection can provide teachers with space to consider the implications for their literacy instruction and larger unit design. As Claire described,

I think when I read a book alone, I don’t get the most out of it. I got way more out of...discussing it with all of you and hearing Melissa’s perspective, and Phoebe’s perspective. And that opened my eyes to seven, eight different things I could do in my classroom. And I think making that space in your school is really important, especially when discussing books because, you know, I only hold one perspective of life. If, hopefully, your staff is diverse, then you can talk with your co-workers and have differing opinions and perspectives and come up with better ideas.

Deliberately setting aside time to reflect on how this process went allows teachers to process their experiences and hear one another’s perspectives, something that can be easily overlooked in an educator’s busy schedule. This time also allows teachers to make intentional plans to continue this work in their own classrooms.

Remember that this is a cycle that you can follow more than once using different identity categories as lenses for analysis. While in our study we used the disability identity as the focus, you might try this meeting cycle considering how

race, social class or gender expression are depicted in a piece of children's literature. Booklists to support you in identifying texts for these other lenses include: We Need Diverse Books, Bank Street College of Education's Book Recommendations, and the Cooperative Children's Book Center (see websites in References).

As your team gets better at this work, the process of inter-observation to support the application of critical literacy in your facilitation of read alouds might not be as integral to your work together. But, you will still want to preserve time in your schedules to do the critical reading work together. It is essential for teachers to engage in this work so they feel more prepared to engage their students in it. And, as Claire illustrates in her quote above, participating in these conversations about children's literature inspires deeper and more varied perspectives on how to enact these lessons in the classroom. Critically reading children's literature as a team should become a habit that you keep up so that you can continue to see texts in new ways. Once the skill of critically reading children's literature has been cultivated, even just preserving 20-minutes at the beginning of a faculty meeting to critically discuss upcoming mentor texts can go a long way in ensuring that equity work is infused throughout literacy instruction.

As we begin to consider what post-pandemic instruction will look like, we know that there can be no return to "normal"; "normal" practices did not effectively serve many of our students. As novelist Arundhati Roy (2020) has eloquently argued, the "pandemic is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next," and we can either enter it, dragging with us the problems of the past, or "ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it." We need to leave behind the deficit orientations and "neutrality" of Common Core-era text practices and instead embrace deeper conversations around identity in all of its variations with students. The only way that we can do that is to build the capacity of teachers to see texts in different ways so that they can help their students read critically.

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