

Learning to Queer Text: Epiphanies From a Family Critical Literacy Practice

Nicola A. McClung

Picture book reading incites a family controversy and becomes a catalyst for early critical literacy. A young child learns to transform the dominant narratives that threaten her understanding of self and family.

Late one summer, soon after I had finished teaching courses in elementary literacy at my university, events at home unfolded to fundamentally shift how I think about classroom practice. I was looking for picture books (Sipe, 1998; Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007) with my daughter, Ada (all names are pseudonyms), who had just turned 4. At a local bookstore, we happened upon the simple chapter book series *The Princess in Black* by Shannon Hale and Dean Hale (2014, 2015, 2016), which offered a feminist re-envisioning of gender roles and portrayed darkness as strong and good in ways that are consistent with how I want Ada to see the world. This *New York Times* best-selling series appealed to Ada as well. To my delight, she began carrying the books around and requesting readings from family members and family friends. However, the language in the books created tension, embarrassment, and anger in our family and community. Although this experience was challenging, it provided Ada with the opportunity to build a new set of literacy tools so she could speak back to normative texts. It also illuminated my understanding of the importance of critical literacy during early childhood.

Family Background and Context

This need for an early critical literacy tool kit was particularly important to Ada because her family structure and characteristics are unlike most common representations in children's books. Ada, like Barack Obama, has East African and Euro-American ancestry. I, Ada's mother, am a white, U.S.-born, cis-gender woman; I identify as female, the gender I was assigned at birth. Ada's other parent, Jesse, is a black East African immigrant; Jesse is transgender and

identifies as both male and female. In Ada's words, Jesse is "a boy mixed up with a girl."

Jesse came up with Daya as a name for a gender-nonconforming parent. Jesse's chosen gender pronouns are *they*, *them*, and *theirs*, which are preferred by many queer-identified transgender people; however, in this discussion, I use the male pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his*, which are what Ada says and are also acceptable to Jesse.

Ada's experience of family subverts the heteronormative and homonormative assumptions that a family, whether straight or gay, consists of a married couple who live together in the same house with only their own children (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Jesse lives with another black trans immigrant. I am the single parent of another daughter, Ellis, who is white and younger than Ada. As committed coparents, Jesse and I live largely separate but intertwined lives. In our postmodern, queer conception of kinship, we share an intimate network of family and friends in our "family tent" (Stacey, 1996, 2002).

Although we consider ourselves and our family to be valid and whole, Ada wrestles with a family structure that has no cultural blueprint (Stacey, 2002); her experience of family does not match the dispersed and pervasive image of the "normal" modern nuclear family as rendered by institutions, structures of understanding, behaviors, practical orientations, utterances, and texts (Berlant & Warner, 2000).

Nicola A. McClung is an assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco, CA, USA; e-mail namclung@usfca.edu.

Dominant and Nondominant Families in Children's Books

Picture books that amplify a wide range of voices are a central interest of mine. I passionately believe that when children have access to books about people whose lives look like their own lives, they will be happier, healthier, and infinitely more motivated to read. In the best of circumstances, such books provide a medium through which children can learn about their culture, social arrangements, and an expansive range of possible identities (Sterponi, 2011).

Although it is possible to find books containing nonwhite families (e.g., *Ada Twist, Scientist* by Andrea Beaty), multiethnic families (e.g., *Black, White, Just Right!* by Marguerite W. Davol), and gays and lesbians (e.g., *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell), as a whole, these books tend to uphold the heteronormative or homonormative family. Additionally, although children's books that challenge normative conceptions of family (e.g., *The Family Book* by Todd Parr, *My Mommy Is a Boy* by Jason Martinez) exist and are important, they predominantly focus on issues of identity, acceptance, and inclusion.

Thus, the overwhelming focus of texts about the ins and outs of childhood in the United States is on two-parent, cohabitating families that are white, cisgender, able-bodied, and heterosexual (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). These normative themes are so commonly repeated across time, genre, topic, and media that they are unremarkable (Marshall, 2016).

Collectively, such texts marginalize the reader whose life does not conform to the dominant view of a proper childhood (Goldblatt, 1995). They reflect, position, and produce the legitimacy or illegitimacy of a child's self (e.g., Moje & Luke, 2009), relationships (C. Myers, 2014), and family.

Ada's Response to the Pervasive Modern Nuclear Family

When Ada turned 3, like a handful of her peers, responding to the power of discourse upholding the "normal" family and limited socially valued language to describe a relationship to a queer parent,

she made the decision to call Jesse Dad. Although it did not capture the complexity of his gender identity, Jesse decided that *Dad* felt right to him if it felt right to Ada.

For the most part, social validity and ease came with the title *Dad*. For example, Jesse does not need to explain what a dad is, and when Ada's dentist told her to let "Mom and Dad" help her brush her teeth, the heteronormative assumption folded neatly into her understanding of self. From Ada's perspective, *Dad* legitimized our family, aligning us with the dominant view of family, in the world and in print.

Although I admired Ada's efforts to actively claim a valid identity, it became increasingly clear to me that it was not enough—or even possible—to simply provide her with a wide range of diverse and representative perspectives. She needed tools with which to negotiate her textual and discursive environments.

PAUSE AND PONDER

- Which social markers describe your own family (e.g., race, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, immigration status, language)? How are they the same as or different from those around you?
- Consider the children's books in your classroom or library. Identify which types of families are present and which are absent.
- How do you respond to, uphold, or resist the dominant assumptions about family portrayed in children's books?

The Catalyst for Critical Literacy: The Princess in Black

The overwhelming need to explore early critical literacy arose in the context of *The Princess in Black*. Although the book challenges gender stereotypes, it can also be interpreted as containing oppressive language and themes related to race and injustice.

As the book opens, Princess Magnolia, who is white, is having tea in her castle. Suddenly, she is called on to fight a monster, and she secretly puts on black clothing and becomes the Princess in Black. Her unicorn, Frimplepants, turns into a monster-fighting pony: "He was no longer Frimplepants the unicorn. He was Blacky, the Princess in Black's faithful pony" (Hale & Hale, 2014, p. 7).

As an East African immigrant, when Jesse first saw the name Blacky, something did not feel right to him. However, when Ada took the book to an African American barbershop, there was outrage. Why was Ada reading a book about a white princess who rides a black pony named Blacky? Much to my embarrassment, Dictionary.com provided a wake-up call: "*blacky*...noun...*Disparaging and Offensive*. 1. a contemptuous term used to refer to a black person" (Blacky, n.d.).

Jesse tweeted the lead author, “why did u decide to name your horse ‘blacky?’” and “as a parent with a daughter who’s into princesses, I am disappointed with ur insensitivity” (see Figure 1). The author tweeted back, “Blacky is a common name children give to pets with black fur,” and “I’m sorry, I’m unaware of any insensitivity with the name” (see Figure 2). Later, Jesse said, “The editor should have caught that.”

Turning to Critical Literacy for Guidance

Should we discard *The Princess in Black* because it inadvertently promotes injustice? Or, should we keep the book because the authors have good intentions? Not able to make a decision, I turned to critical literacy for guidance, which I was familiar with in the context of older children.

From this perspective, all texts are ideological, and all readers (and writers) are complicit in upholding or confronting the injustices reinforced in print (e.g., Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005; Luke

Figure 1
Jesse Tweets the Lead Author of *The Princess in Black*

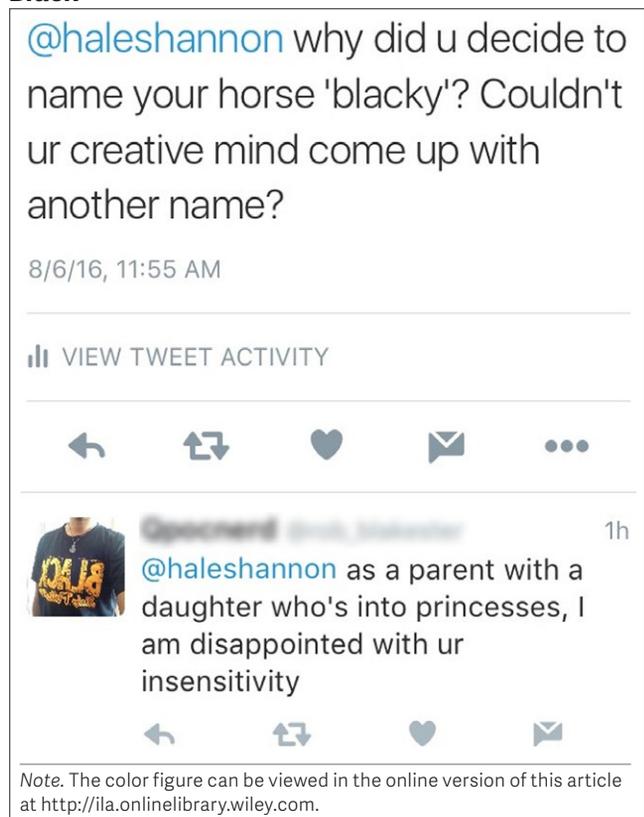


Figure 2
The Author Tweets Back



& Freebody, 1997). The goal of critical literacy is to actively analyze power and inequality in human relationships for the purpose of creating a more just world (Ciardiello, 2004).

Prior Research on Critical Literacy With Young Children

At age 4, would Ada be capable of critical literacy? As it turns out, researchers have demonstrated that young children are quite capable of taking up issues of hegemony and representation (e.g., Dyson, 1989; Leland et al., 2005; Ryan, 2010; Wohlwend, 2011). Dyson was among the first to describe how young children resist dominant narratives to position themselves as agents in their own childhoods. One example comes from Ryan, who showed how a kindergartner altered a heteronormative Mother’s Day classroom activity to create cards for her two mothers.

Building on children’s inclination to dismantle inequitable social arrangements, along with critical literacy techniques developed for older children, a number of teacher researchers have attempted to directly influence young children’s ability to negotiate issues of power and injustice. For example, when O’Brien (2001a, 2001b) asked ethnically diverse 5–8-year-old children to interrogate the taken-for-granted messages in Mother’s Day catalogs, they were able to make sense of inequality and injustice in their lives by troubling stereotypical

gender roles associated with motherhood (O'Brien, 1994).

Working with even younger children, Vasquez (2017) introduced 3- and 4-year-olds to critical literacy on the first day of preschool. As Vasquez argued, "The earlier children are introduced to [critical literacy], the sooner they will understand what it means to be researchers of language and explore the ways texts can be revised, rewritten, or reconstructed to shift or reframe the message(s) conveyed" (p. 4).

The Current Study

With the depth of knowing a child that comes from being a parent, I put on my teacher researcher hat. I resolved to make use of *The Princess in Black* to encourage Ada to begin to develop a set of critical literacy techniques or capacities (Patterson, 1997) and to document and reflect on the process.

Teaching Strategy

Drawing from the literature, including the four resources model (e.g., Freebody & Luke, 1990), I planned to introduce Ada to critical literacy by historicizing and challenging the pony's name. I hoped to leverage any opportunities that arose to support Ada to be a code breaker (code-related skills), meaning maker (comprehension skills), text user (understanding of the purposes of text), and text critic (ability to analyze and critique text).

I wanted Ada to begin to uncover hidden messages, the authors' intentions, and other contradictory perspectives, including viewpoints that she brings to bear on the text (e.g., Ciardiello, 2004; Sipe, 2000). I hoped she could learn to ask questions of text, such as, "Whose voices are being heard, and whose voices are absent?" (Luke, 2000).

Data and Method

Most of the research on early critical literacy has been conducted by teacher researchers studying their own students in the classroom (e.g., Bourke, 2008; Kuby, 2013; Vasquez, 2017). In this study, my unique position as a mother and scholar allowed for fluid access to the daily routines of our family that an outside researcher would not have had (Adler & Adler, 1996).

Faced with the quandary (Zaner, 2004) of what to do about the offensive language in *The Princess in Black*, I used autoethnography as a form of social

action to systematically chronicle my family's experience in an attempt to both describe cultural experience and affect classroom practice; specifically, I wove together elements of autobiography, ethnography, and the research literature to retrospectively write about the insights or epiphanies (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Couser, 1997; Denzin, 1989) that were made possible because I am an educator and a parent and because my family is part of queer culture (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). The data came from my memories, feelings, and planned and spontaneous audio recordings of family readings and conversations, as well as from Ada's writings and drawings.

In this study, I consider the following questions: Is a preschool-age child capable of critical literacy that focuses on the intersections of race, gender identity, and family? What are the outcomes of such a critical literacy inquiry for a parent and a child? What are the challenges? What are the implications for classroom teaching?

Embarking on Critical Literacy

Ada and I begin a new reading of *The Princess in Black*. When we arrive at the passage in which Frimplepants turns into the pony, I ask, "Did you know that some people think *blacky* is a bad word?" "Daya does," Ada exclaims. "What did he say?" I ask. "He said, 'I do not like *Blacky*,' but Daya does like Frimplepants. I told him he has to like *Blacky* because *Blacky* is black." Ada is intimately familiar with Jesse's love of all things having to do with black pride. She continues, "Well, I like the name. Well, *both* names."

I push through my reluctance and discomfort in introducing my 4-year-old to the concept of racism and search for the right words to historicize the word *blacky* so she can understand. "What if the name hurts people's feelings? A long time ago, some people used it a lot to say bad words about people with brown skin." Ada gasps. "That's very bad," she says in a serious voice. "If the word is offensive, do you think that maybe we should change it?" I ask, encouraging her to be a text critic. (I don't think she knows the meaning of the word *offensive*, but I figure that exposure to such words builds her capacity as a meaning maker and is a first step toward challenging text.)

Holding a black marker that I had placed strategically next to the book, Ada says, "How about we color [*Blacky*] in, and then we can say, like, *Jovy*?" We decide that she will cross out the original name

with the black marker, and I will write *Jovy* above it using a red marker (see Figure 3). When the word is no longer visible, she steps into the role of code breaker, instructing me to spell *Jovy*. “/J/,” she says, and together we say the sounds as I write the letters in red ink.

The next time we encounter the pony, Ada wants to name it *Nami*. We discuss the two names for a while. I want her to choose one name, which I believe underscores the message that we can transform biased text. Ada insists, however, that the pony will first be *Jovy*, and then *Nami*.

At the next entrance of the character, Ada wants to give the pony a third name, *Slasum*. I argue, “With so many names, we will get confused. How will we know who *Frimplepants* is when he turns into the pony? Let’s choose one name.” Yet, Ada insists, “I want all the other names.” I ask, “Which one will your dad like?” “*Jovy*,” she says.

I am relieved. “So, we are going to keep it *Jovy*?” “Noooooo, we are going to do different names,” Ada explains. My confusion seems ridiculous to her, so I ask, “So, maybe we are changing the story a little bit?” “Yeah, that’s right.” Ada’s tone tells me that she’s trying to be patient with me, but she’s happy that I finally understand. I ask, “So, the pony has ‘different identities?’” “Yes,” Ada responds, seemingly inferring the meaning of identities, “but we are going to keep the *Frimplepants*, the *Frimplepants*.”

Figure 3
Ada Alters the Story From “*Blacky*” to “*Jovy*”



Note. The original text reads, “He was no longer *Frimplepants* the unicorn. He was *Blacky*, the Princess in *Black*’s faithful pony” (Hale & Hale, 2014, p. 19). The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

We decide to add a clarifying sentence the first time the pony appears. I begin to say the words aloud slowly as I write them in the book: “*Jovy* had...” Ada completes my sentence: “Many names.” She understands the alphabetic principle that speech can be translated into print. She also understands that text can be negotiated; her voice can be heard and the authority of the author can be contested.

Days later, when we start the third book in the series, Ada initiates taking action on the text. When we come to *Blacky*, she gasps. “Where are the permanent markers?” she asks. “We have to make the people feel better.” She carefully writes in the new name, “*iit*” (see Figure 4), and tries to read it aloud.

The Unexpected Challenges of Critical Literacy With Young Children

Our first experience with critical literacy shows that Ada is quite willing to alter text. However, it also shows that her ideas are unpredictable, and even though I am an experienced teacher, I struggle to introduce her to the concepts of discrimination and

Figure 4
Ada Renames the Pony From “*Blacky*” to “*iit*”



Note. The original text reads, “*Blacky* reared up on his hind legs. Look out, monsters!” (Hale & Hale, 2016, p. 7). The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

prejudice and to allow the process to unfold according to her sensibilities.

I turn back to the literature. I find that, like me, others have found early critical literacy to be messy and unpredictable (e.g., Blaise, 2005). For example, Kuby (2013) grappled with contradictory desires to protect 5- and 6-year-old students from the reality of racism and to take action on her belief that discussing racism was important. She also struggled to find accurate vocabulary that would not oversimplify gross historical injustices, such as slavery, to allow the students to understand complex issues and multiple viewpoints. Despite the challenges, Kuby, a white Southern teacher, concluded that both she and her ethnically diverse young students were ready and eager to explore issues related to power and privilege in their lives. She concluded by recalling Hannah Arendt's words to expect the unexpected (Berger, 2010), reminding us to remain open to our own tensions and struggles as teachers to allow space for new ways of thinking and learning.

Bourke (2008) also met unanticipated challenges in teaching ethnically diverse first graders to contest messages in fairy tales that reinforced inequality. He bumped up against their firm belief that the rules of text could not be broken (e.g., evil characters cannot be good, good characters are not evil)—even when the implicit or explicit ideologies precluded the well-being of his students (e.g., light skin equals beauty, evil is represented by darkness).

However, Bourke (2008) persisted, inviting his students to write from the perspectives of the characters; to his surprise, they began to alter the fairy tale construct. For example, one student was able to disrupt the good/bad dichotomy in "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" when he wrote about the goats and the troll becoming friends. Bourke concluded that although the outcome was different than he expected, he had planted the seeds of critical thinking, which he began to see carry over to other areas of the curriculum.

Like Bourke (2008), I am encouraged that Ada's experience with critical literacy transfers. She begins to alter text to fit her life—in different contexts and in conversations with other family members. For example, we cowrite a manifesto that delineates how we want to act at home and in the world (Rubin, 2015), which includes intentions such as "Use kind voices" and "Be flexible." Later, demonstrating her new critical metalinguistic awareness, Ada asks, "Why are we calling it a manifesto? We should call it a girlifesto because we are all girls." For clarification, she adds, "Well, Daya is a little bit girl."

Making Self and Family Visible by Appropriating Text

As educators, we frequently turn to picture books to help children make sense of complicated issues and life events. Ada has been struggling to be a big sister, so we read various books about getting a new sibling. Every picture book I can find revolves around two-parent, mother/father families who look the same (usually white). Even stories about anthropomorphized animal families tend to adhere to the same pattern.

Perhaps longing for the days when she was the baby in the family, Ada identifies with the baby in *Julius, the Baby of the World* by Kevin Henkes (1990), a story that upholds the normative family story line within a family of mice. However, Ada asks her grandma if she can change the color of Julius's fur from white to brown.

Pleased with this request, I envision Ada altering the illustrations to look more like our multiethnic, queer family. I choose some skin tone- and fur-colored crayons, and Ada arranges them in order (white to medium brown to dark brown) as we read the names of the crayons aloud. Then, she discards the white crayon and explains, "The mouse is already white."

When we start reading, Ada changes her mind about Julius becoming brown and instead wants him to be rainbow-colored. This time, drawing on previous experience with the unexpected, I find it easier to let Ada take the lead. I'm not surprised that we need a completely different set of colors than what I had selected. Later, Ada tells me that she wanted the mouse to be rainbow-colored because her own preschool class is named the Rainbow Flamingos.

On another day, I catch Ada reading *Guess How Much I Love You* by Sam McBratney (1995) to Ellis by transforming the text in ways that make sense to her 18-month-old sister. Although Ada is aware that the story line focuses on a father/son dyad, she goes through the book pointing at the rabbits and using the names Mama, Baby, and Big Sister as she rewrites the story to reflect Ellis's understanding of self and family.

Introducing Multiple, Contradictory Viewpoints

Our first steps into critical literacy show that 4-year-old Ada is capable of disrupting the author's authority and that the inquiry, initially based on her reading of *The Princess in Black*, has generalized

to other texts. However, I realize that we have not discussed the tension between multiple and possibly conflicting interpretations of text. For example, the name Blacky is in keeping with the idea that darkness equals good (and the good intentions of the authors), but it is also an insulting word.

Drawing on the everyday and the familiar, I present to Ada a picture book I wrote, *Scientists* (McClung, 2014), in which a black trans scientist (Jesse) introduces basic science research to the beginning reader. I point to my name on the cover and ask, “Who is the author?” “Mama!” Ada shouts. I ask, “Why do you think I chose to put Daya in this book?” Ada replies, “Because he knows a lot about science.” In her unprejudiced mind, *scientist* trumps *black* and *trans*, which are unremarkable and expected.

I ask, “If you were going to write a book, what would you write about?” Ada says that she’d write about a princess in yellow. Her book would be a long tale, it turns out, about a frog chasing a baby up a tree, and it would include a lot of potty talk. Although in no way comparable to the oppressive history of *blacky*, the “bad words” provide an unexpected opportunity to ask Ada how other people, such as her teachers, might interpret her text.

Expanding Critical Literacy Techniques Beyond Home

One day at the pool, Ada encounters a rare example of text that validates her understanding of gender while also raising questions about equity and the social construction of text. A new sign for an all-genders bathroom includes symbols for a man (in pants), a woman (in a dress), and a trans person (with one leg in pants and the other in a dress), making it possible for our entire family to participate in Family Swim. However, right next to this bathroom is another single-occupancy bathroom, but the sign for that bathroom excludes the trans person. Drawing on her emerging social semiotic tool kit (Luke, 2000), Ada says, “So that one is for everyone, but that one is for just boys and girls, but they forgot the boys mixed up with girls.”

In Ada’s mind, the sign, which unintentionally and harmlessly left trans people out, can be fixed (see Figure 5). I make the decision that learning about LGBTIQ issues is a project for a later date. For now, I am satisfied by the belief that her new ability to notice text that silences and excludes (Luke, 2000) will be the foundation for future conversations about discrimination and transphobia.

Figure 5
“Family Swim” by Ada



Note. The figures in the center (left to right) are symbols for the bathrooms for women, “boys mixed up with girls,” girls, and men. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

Conclusion: A Beginning

Family structure is a defining feature of Ada’s life, as it is for many young children. When she encountered the recursive ideologies that indicated she was lacking something (a dad), she quickly altered Jesse’s chosen identity label, positioning herself within the dominant culture in a way that worked for her and our family. In doing so, she demonstrated that texts were key in mediating her identity but that she could also actively mediate texts to powerfully construct her own childhood (e.g., Dyson, 1989; Moje & Luke, 2009; Ryan, 2010).

However, assimilation is not always desired, or even an option, and critical literacy offers strategies to even the youngest children for navigating text and for participating in the creation of a more humane, just world. By changing names, words, and images, Ada showed that she was capable of transforming and redesigning text in novel ways (Luke & Freebody, 1997). When she encountered texts that did not represent her life, rather than simply claiming a predetermined, valid identity, she learned to construct counterstories about families like ours whose stories are usually not told, challenging the majoritarian story (Marshall, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). She amplified multiple voices and valid identities—including a transgender dad, a single-parent household, and a rainbow

mouse—to actively participate in the world as she saw it.

With practice, Ada gained perspective on what an author chooses to write about, what gets omitted, and the multiple possible interpretations of any text. She took steps toward understanding that texts are not free of ideology and that they can influence our ideas and emotions and how we operate in the world (Luke & Freebody, 1997).

Although one would be hard-pressed to find another child who shares the same complicated web of social markers that create the backdrop of Ada's childhood, I hope her idiosyncratic story speaks to the possibility that each child is uniquely situated in the world and to the benefits of critical literacy for even the youngest children. In this study, Ada showed that, at the age of 4, she was capable of wrestling with the regimes of truth (Foucault, 1979) and challenging the status quo. As a newly minted critical reader, she understood a vital lesson: Text, especially text that counters our understanding of self and family, is not sacrosanct.

Implications for Teachers

Through this study, I learned that we cannot escape the ideological, value-laden power of text even in our most protected, sacred, early childhood spaces: in our homes, preschools, kindergartens, and our seemingly socially just picture books. However, not only is critical literacy possible with young children (Comber, 2001/2003, 2013), it is also a necessary consideration each time we engage young children with text.

The insights gleaned from this study have implications for the classroom. First, it was through practice that I became more comfortable with decentering my own authority as a parent and a teacher (Aukerman, 2012), allowing Ada to determine the outcome of our work. Second, over time, I learned to engage her in increasingly sophisticated conversations about text. I became comfortable with weaving together language that Ada understood and complicated words, such as *identity*, that she did not, believing that simply hearing these new words in context would begin to build her lexicon in the area of social and cultural critique. Third, like other scholars (e.g., Kuby, 2013), I learned to accept my own struggles and discomfort in deciding which social issues to take up as I searched for the right balance between preserving the innocence of childhood—the narrative that all people and families are

equal—and the social reality that we are not. Last, I came to view early critical literacy as a beginner's set of tools that can later lead to a child's more specific ethical positions around history, inequality, and injustice (Patterson, 1997).

From this vantage point, as educators, through our own openness, trial and error, reading, reflection, and research (perhaps using autoethnography), we can begin to support our youngest students to challenge injustice in print. For example, although picture books, as a whole, may stipulate what counts as kin, we must be aware that there is a multiplicity of ways to be a valid family. Whether a child, for example, has a Deaf or disabled parent or divorced parents; is adopted or lives with a grandparent; has an incarcerated parent, two dads, three moms, or a deceased parent; lives in foster care; is the child of an egg and/or sperm donor; has a parent who is chronically ill, undocumented, or who lives in another country, critical literacy offers techniques to examine and resist our heterosexualized, gendered, racialized, classed, able-bodied world as it is reproduced in text (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Even for the child whose family meets the dominant cultural expectations without a hitch, critical literacy is a pathway to humanize children who do not share the same privileges and to facilitate their vision and pursuit of a better, more equitable world (W.D. Myers, 2014).

TAKE ACTION!

1. Identify repetitive themes in picture books that omit or reinforce stereotypes about marginalized groups.
 - Brainstorm critical literacy strategies that can be used to challenge these stereotypes during read-alouds.
 - Try out your strategies.
 - Reflect on your successes and obstacles.
 - Document your process, and discuss your findings with your colleagues.
2. Identify the various examples in this article in which Ada steps into the four roles of the critical reader: code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text critic (e.g., Freebody & Luke, 1990).
3. Reflect on examples of your own students acting in each of the four roles.

REFERENCES

- Adler, P.A., & Adler, P. (1996). Parent-as-researcher: The politics of researching in the personal life. *Qualitative Sociology*, 19(1), 35–58. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02393247>
- Aukerman, M. (2012). “Why do you say yes to Pedro, but no to me?”: Toward a critical literacy of dialogic engagement. *Theory Into Practice*, 51(1), 42–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2012.636335>
- Berger, I. (2010). Extending the notion of pedagogical narration through Hannah Arendt’s political thought. In V. Pacini-Ketchabaw (Ed.), *Flows, rhythms, and intensities of early childhood education curriculum* (pp. 57–76). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Berlant, L., & Warner, M. (2000). Sex in public. In L. Berlant (Ed.), *Intimacy* (pp. 311–330). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Blacky. (n.d.). In *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/blacky>
- Blaise, M. (2005). *Playing it straight: Uncovering gender discourses in the early childhood classroom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bochner, A.P., & Ellis, C. (1992). Personal narrative as a social approach to interpersonal communication. *Communication Theory*, 2(2), 165–172. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.1992.tb00036.x>
- Bourke, R.T. (2008). First graders and fairy tales: One teacher’s action research of critical literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(4), 304–312. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.62.4.3>
- Giardiello, A.V. (2004). Democracy’s young heroes: An instructional model of critical literacy practices. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(2), 138–147. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.58.2.2>
- Comber, B. (2003). Critical literacy: Power and pleasure with language in the early years. In V. Vasquez & B. Comber (Eds.), *Critical perspectives in literacy: Demonstrations of curricular possibilities* [Handout for a preconvention institute of the International Reading Association, Orlando, FL] (pp. 4–18). (Reprinted from *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 2001, 24(3), 168–181.)
- Comber, B. (2013). Critical literacy in the early years: Emergence and sustenance in an age of accountability. In J. Larson & J. Marsh (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of early childhood literacy* (pp. 587–601). London, UK: Sage.
- Couser, G.T. (1997). *Recovering bodies: Illness, disability, and life writing*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Denzin, N.K. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Dyson, A. (1989). *Multiple worlds of child writers: Friends learning to write*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T., & Bochner, A. (2010). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), article 10. Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage.
- Freebody, P., & Luke, A. (1990). Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural context. *Prospect*, 5(7), 7–16.
- Goldblatt, E.C. (1995). *Round my way: Authority and double consciousness in three urban high school writers*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Kuby, C.R. (2013). Critical inquiry in early childhood education: A teacher’s exploration. *Voices of Practitioners*, 8(1), 1–15.
- Leland, C., Harste, J., & Huber, K. (2005). Out of the box: Critical literacy in a first-grade classroom. *Language Arts*, 82(4), 257–268.
- Luke, A. (2000). Critical literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43(2), 448–461.
- Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1997). Shaping the social practices of reading. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke, & P. Freebody (Eds.), *Constructing critical literacies: Teaching and learning textual practice* (pp. 185–225). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Marshall, E. (2016). Counter-storytelling through graphic life writing. *Language Arts*, 94(2), 79–83.
- Moje, E.B., & Luke, A. (2009). Literacy and identity: Examining the metaphors in history and contemporary research. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(4), 415–437. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.44.4.7>
- Myers, C. (2014, March 15). The apartheid of children’s literature. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/the-apartheid-of-childrens-literature.html>
- Myers, W.D. (2014, March 16). Where are the people of color in children’s books? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html>
- O’Brien, J. (1994). Show Mum you love her: Taking a new look at junk mail. *Reading*, 28(1), 43–46.
- O’Brien, J. (2001a). Children reading critically: A local history. In B. Comber, & A. Simpson (Eds.), *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms* (pp. 37–54). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- O’Brien, J. (2001b). “I knew that already”: How children’s books limit inquiry. In S. Boran & B. Comber (Eds.), *Critiquing whole language and classroom inquiry* (pp. 142–168). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Patterson, A. (1997). Setting limits to English. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke, & P. Freebody (Eds.), *Constructing critical literacies: Teaching and learning textual practice* (pp. 335–353). Sydney, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Roseneil, S., & Budgeon, S. (2004). Cultures of intimacy and care beyond “the family”: Personal life and social change in the early 21st century. *Current Sociology*, 52(2), 135–159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392104041798>
- Rubin, G. (2015). *Better than before*. New York, NY: Broadway.
- Ryan, C. (2010). “How do you spell family?”: Literacy, heteronormativity, and young children of lesbian mothers (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Sipe, L.R. (1998). How picture books work: A semiotically framed theory of text–picture relationships. *Children’s Literature in Education*, 29(2), 97–108. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022459009182>
- Sipe, L.R. (2000). The construction of literary understanding by first and second graders in oral response to picture storybook read-alouds. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35(2), 252–275. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.35.2.4>
- Solórzano, D.G., & Yosso, T.J. (2001). Critical race and LatCrit theory and method: Counter-storytelling. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(4), 471–495. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390110063365>
- Stacey, J. (1996). *In the name of the family: Rethinking family values in the postmodern age*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Stacey, J. (2002, January). *Fellow families? Genres of gay male intimacy and kinship in a global metropolis*. Draft paper for the CAVA International Seminar. Retrieved from <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/cava/papers/intseminar3stacey.htm>
- Sterponi, L. (2011). Literacy socialization. In A. Duranti, E. Ochs, & B.B. Schieffelin (Eds.), *Handbook of language socialization* (pp. 227–246). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Vasquez, V. (2017). *Critical literacy across the K–6 curriculum*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wohlwend, K.E. (2011). *Playing their way into literacies: Reading, writing, and belonging in the early childhood classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Wolfenbarger, C.D., & Sipe, L.R. (2007). A unique visual and literary art form: Recent research on picture books. *Language Arts*, 84(3), 273–280.
- Zaner, R.M. (2004). *Conversations on the edge: Narratives of ethics and illness*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

LITERATURE CITED

- Hale, S., & Hale, D. (2014). *The Princess in Black*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.
- Hale, S., & Hale, D. (2015). *The Princess in Black and the perfect princess party*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.
- Hale, S., & Hale, D. (2016). *The Princess in Black and the hungry bunny horde*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.
- Henkes, K. (1990). *Julius, the baby of the world*. New York, NY: Greenwillow.
- McBratney, S. (1995). *Guess how much I love you*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.
- McClung, N. (2014). *Scientists*. San Francisco, CA: Xóchitl Justice.

MORE TO EXPLORE

- Blood Orange Press: <http://www.bloodorangepress.com/>
- Reflection Press: <http://www.reflectionpress.com/>
- Xóchitl Justice Press: <http://www.xochitljustice.org/>



ILA Gives You Choices!

Looking for a good book? Check out the 2017 Choices Reading Lists—vetted by students and teachers themselves.

Consider Children's Choices, Teachers' Choices, and Young Adults' Choices for curriculum planning and summer reading.

See all the lists at literacyworldwide.org/choices