

## Critical Conversations: Using Picture Books to Welcome Refugees into Our Classrooms

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### Abstract

*Approximately 11 million children have recently been forced to leave their homes and lives behind due to war, natural disasters and other types of trauma. Reading picture books about refugees in classroom communities that include refugee children may help these children to feel recognized and to realize they are not alone in their situations. All children should see themselves reflected in the literature (Hope, 2008), and children who have arrived suddenly after escaping some sort of tragedy are no different. Using selected children's picture books depicting refugee children not only provides opportunities for teaching critical literacy, but also incorporates global perspectives, as well as perspectives of justice and injustice in the classroom. The multidimensional representations of refugees in picture books also enables teachers to promote critical conversations in the classroom.*

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According to The UN Refugee Agency (2017), 22.5 million people around the world have been forced from home, and over half of these refugees are under the age of 18. Accord-

ing to Hope (2008), refugee children experience substantial hardships when they and their families are affected by poverty, war, and/or natural disasters. Children may arrive “feeling disoriented and bewildered” (p. 298) into our classrooms. Hope describes how refugee children frequently face language and cultural barriers and may feel isolation and friendlessness. The author cites a study by Melzak and Warner (1992), in which refugee children revealed through interviews that they appreciated teachers who “asked about their experiences and included them in the curriculum” (p. 298). Hope stresses the need to integrate refugee children “into what is often a hostile or, sometimes indifferent school environment” (p. 298). How do we make refugee children feel safe, valued and included? How do we talk with our students about refugees in a kind, compassionate manner? One way to address these needs is by using selected children's picture books, which not only provide opportunities for teaching critical literacy, but also incorporate global perspectives, as well as perspectives of justice and injustice in the classroom. Children should see themselves reflected in the literature (Hope, 2008), and children who have arrived suddenly after escaping some sort of trauma are no different.

Reading picture books about refugees in classroom communities that include refugee children may help these children to feel recognized and to realize they are not alone in their situations. The multidimensional representations of refugees in picture books also enables teachers to promote critical conversations in the classroom.

Dolan (2012) defines critical literacy as actively reading and reflecting on text, which encourages critical thinking on topics such as inequality, injustice, and the power of the dominant culture. According to Roy, (2016) critical literacy “acknowledges the situated nature of language, interrogates power relationships, and can make visible the identities and subject positions negotiated in a classroom context” (p. 542). The development of critical literacy skills enables people to interpret messages in the modern world through a critical lens and challenge the power relations within those messages. Educators who facilitate the development of critical literacy encourage children to examine societal issues such as poverty, education, equity, and equality, and institutions such as family and school. As students learn to analyze the structures that serve as norms, they realize these norms are not experienced by all members of society. Critical literacy is not merely about educating children about critical ways of seeing and questioning. It is equally about encouraging what Maxine Greene (1995) calls their “social imagination” which is “the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the street and in our schools” (p.5).

Paulo Freire encouraged readers to “read the word” in order to “read the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Freire implored us to think critically about the world around us through experiences with literature and through an understanding of the powerful nature of text. According to

Dolan (2012), critical literacy is reading text “in an active and reflective manner which promotes a deeper understanding of socially constructed concepts, such as power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships” (p. 5). “Culture is never static” because “the belief systems and practices associated with cultural groups are always under negotiation with new generations” (Lee, 2003, p. 4). Elementary schools constitute one of the most significant cultural niches in which young people begin the process of becoming literate. It is in these settings that children expand their understandings of the purposes of literacy and begin to see how literacy relates to their interactions with others. The instructional approaches and the culture that children experience in classrooms play a major role in shaping their emerging identities as cultural and literate beings (Leland, Harste & Huber, 2005). Books are particularly useful for starting and sustaining critical conversations in classrooms. Students can participate in critical conversations after engaging with picture books that address important topics such as ethnicity, gender, culture, language, people with special needs, immigration, war, refugees and marginalized groups. Dolan suggests that picture books can serve as springboards for critical discussions and “for incorporating global and justice perspectives in the classroom” (p. 5). Critical conversations highlight diversity and difference, while calling attention to the nature and role of literacy in our society. Children begin to understand what is and is not valued through the works of authors who create picture books. Reading aloud from high-quality literature supports young children’s literacy development in multiple ways. Including the reading and discussion of critical literacy texts can add even

more learning opportunities for students by opening up spaces for building critical literacy awareness in classrooms.

Conceptually, reading critical picture books aloud to children, is anchored in Freebody and Luke's model of reading as social practice (1997). Arguing that literacy is never neutral, Freebody and Luke identify four different views of literacy: reading as decoding; reading as a way of co-producing a meaningful reading; reading as language in use; and finally, reading as a way to interrogate the assumptions that are embedded in text as well as the assumptions which are brought to the text. Part of learning to read is being able to look critically at the images and messages in books, to understand what can be learned from authors, and to think about problematic stereotypes authors and illustrators might perpetuate. A critical literacy approach includes a focus on social justice and the role that we each play in challenging or helping to perpetuate the injustices we identify in our world. To prepare literate individuals for the global society, more is needed than to teach children how to decode and comprehend texts. What is needed now is a critical understanding of language as a cultural resource that can be used to challenge or maintain systems of domination (Janks, 2000). This article will look specifically at using picture books to encourage conversations about the ever-increasing marginalized group, refugees, while focusing on building students' awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead.

Today there are refugees in countries all over the world (UN Refugee Agency, 2017). Many people are not able to receive the protection of their state and therefore require the protection of the global community. Picture books about refugees address a range of universal

emotions including fear, grief and confusion. Several books pay homage to the resilience of children placed in difficult situations. These books provide ideal teaching opportunities for exploring issues such as compassion, empathy, tolerance, justice, conflict resolution and a respect for human rights. The reasons why asylum seekers seek refuge are many, and to this day, people are still unaware of the difficulties and hardships refugee children have experienced.

While it is important for refugees to encounter their stories in classrooms, it is equally important for other children to hear these stories and to learn about their experiences. Hope (2008) makes the argument that children's literature about the refugee experience provides an ideal context for sharing stories, feelings and fears undergone by refugee children. Critical discussions of picture books can facilitate the understanding of the refugee experience. In addition, such discussions serve as a springboard for sensitive topics related to persecution, flight and resettlement, while also reassuring refugee readers that there is new life and hope for the future.

Roche (2015) suggests that when a child listens to a story and has time to dwell on the pictures and discuss the book with peers in a safe and interactive social setting, a whole new sense of making meaning comes into being. For critical engagement with both text and illustrations to work well, teachers need to be knowledgeable about the book(s) being used, critically aware, willing to listen to and open to learning from students, and committed to creating a community of inquiry in the classroom.

Giving children *time to think* is crucial. Additionally, listening actively as others speak builds reciprocity of respect and a

sense of community. Finally, critical literacy and book talks offer children the opportunity to speak, listen, reflect, have an opinion, make statements, question and to be listened to (Donnelly, 1994, p. 7).

According to Cox, Miller and Berg (2017) there are eight steps for successfully sharing a critical literacy book aloud:

1. Select a book that draws attention to social issues or raises questions about the social world, for example, refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers.
2. Preview the book. Look for places that raise issues or might be a springboard for a conversation about social issues. Also, identify vocabulary you may want to introduce during a mini-lesson or a book introduction. Meller, Richardson, and Hatch (2009) suggest phrasing questions to "...illicit children's own questions, further their understanding of the issues in the book, and encourage the children to make connections between themselves and the text" (p. 77). Ask "why?" "how?" and "what do you think?" questions.
3. As you formulate your critical questions to use during the read-aloud, write them on sticky notes, and place them throughout the book.
4. Activate students' prior knowledge. This can be done by asking thought provoking questions related to issues in the text or by sharing a physical object related to the book with the students.

5. Conduct a picture walk through the book. Show the cover, title, and pictures, and ask students to make predictions. Introduce new vocabulary.

6. Read the story and discuss the information you previously wrote on the sticky notes as you come to them in the text. Encourage students to make connections to their own lives and to other books.

7. Ask students to write or draw about the events in the story, thinking about the discussion and relating it to their own lives.

8. Invite students to continue the discussion of the text and the issues it addressed. Consider using the book connections students shared as future critical literacy read-alouds (Cox, Miller & Berg, 2017, pp.49-50).

This method of examining critical literacy with students works well with books about refugees and refugee children. Not only will refugee children in the classroom feel a sense of recognition and support as their story is told, but other children in the classroom will come to understand the plight of the refugees and hopefully gain a sense of empathy for their new classmates. Coming to this mutual understanding will help create a caring and compassionate community of learners. The results of critical conversations about refugees are multi-faceted. In reading about and discussing the issues faced by refugees, students can begin to develop an understanding of critical topics in our society. The picture books and the conversations that sur-

round them can help refugee children tell their stories. As classmates learn about the emotions and difficulties experienced by refugees, they can better understand the lives of refugee children who may become a part of their classroom community. Through critical read alouds, and especially those focusing on refugees and refugee children, students can become aware of realities in our society that are tragic and unjust. Through their new understandings, students can become change agents who “read the word” and “read the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987) in order to do their part in making our society a better place for all.

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