



Teacher Resistance to Critical Conversation: Exploring Why Teachers Avoid Difficult Topics in Their Classrooms

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As teacher educators we feel a responsibility for helping teachers and children take up important and difficult conversations about world issues. Even with the recent rise in quality and quantity of children's literature, librarians, teachers, and administrators remain unsure about whether conversations about social issues are important and appropriate for children in schools. Teachers also, with the mandates of NCLB, are faced with time restraints and relevance: if a book does not teach a skill or serve a knowledge or content purpose, there is not time to read it. We disagree. We see schools as agents for social change. Therefore, as educators select quality reading materials and engage in critical discussions with students around these texts, important world issues must be part of the equation.

Critical literacy expands the notion of literacy beyond traditional decoding and comprehension to incorporate critical thinking and reflection. Drawing on the work of social critical theorists (Gee, 1996; Luke & Freebody, 1997), critical literacy considers the ways texts are constructed within social, political, and historical contexts and how this in turn positions readers by various readings and interpretations. Within this framework, reading is seen as a social practice (Comber, 2001). Since all texts represent particular cultural positions and discourses,

children's literature may be regarded as a way to invite readers to engage in critical discussions of complex issues such as gender, race, and social class.

Purpose of Study

Our work here stems from our interest in providing critical literacy professional development opportunities for teachers. In our own work as elementary teachers during the 1980s and 1990s, we helped children learn to read by using real books in our classrooms. We felt a void, however, when it came to thinking about or addressing issues such as power, social justice, and equity in the world with our students. Today, as teacher educators in different parts of the country, we are working collaboratively to provide time and support for teachers who want to create richer and more critical conversations with elementary and middle grade students. As we begin to study our data, we now share a growing concern for why practicing teachers and pre-service teachers are reluctant to include particular pieces of children's literature in the classroom and why they work so hard to avoid controversy during discussions.

A Review of Children's Literature and Teacher Discussion Groups

Since the late 1980s when teachers began using a greater variety of materials for instructional purposes (Brown

& Cambourne, 1987), decision-making responsibilities regarding classroom literature choices also increased, heightening the role teachers play in what happens when children read real books in school (Peterson & Eeds, 2007). Even though many teachers feel overwhelmed by the accountability measures put forth by NCLB, some teachers continue to use children's literature for reading instruction, writing instruction, content learning, and pleasure (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). These teachers know children respond favorably to texts selected by teacher professionals who understand individual needs and interests better than publishing companies who write standardized texts; but these teachers also know that all texts are "educational or influential in some way; and... cannot help but reflect an ideology" (Hunt, 2003, p. 3).

The idea that children's literature shapes thinking is not new. Centuries ago, traditional folklore was typically linked to social or political issues; for instance, in the late 1600s Perrault collected fairy tales to entertain the adult court of Louis XIV and then during the 1800s (much to the dismay of Rational Moralists and Puritans) these same tales provided readers with a form of moral instruction (Hallett & Karasek, 2002). While we feel it is important for teachers to understand the history and politics of children's literature, it does not solve the dilemma teachers face concerning books in the classroom – the acquisition of a strong knowledge base of children's literature, the ability to take a critical stance toward literature, and finding time for collegial interaction and collaboration.

Some researchers have explored teacher professional development groups and critical literacy topics. Lewis & Ketter (2001) examined the social politics of response to multicultural literature in a rural pre-dominantly white middle school setting. Their longitudinal work pointed to stark ignorance regarding issues of power, privilege, and race as white teachers and researchers performed whiteness, or ideas about race that refer to white dominance that marginalizes people of color, in a professional development group. Raphael, Dampousse, Highfield, and Florio-Ruane (2001) found reading and talking about autobiographies to be a valuable form of professional development as well. As teachers in their study read, wrote, and talked about literature they discovered new ways to help children experience literature in similar ways. Dialogue is an important model for teachers and children to construct meaning and reflect on new pedagogical ways of being in the classroom (Barnes, 1993; Peterson & Eeds, 2007).

Methods

Since we believe teachers must have a strong knowledge of children's literature, professional development in the area of children's literature is a viable topic for educators. Within this professional development context, we asked:

1. What do teachers consider as they make professional decisions about classroom materials for literacy

instruction?

2. What happens when teachers discuss children's literature from a critical literacy perspective?

We worked with 15 practicing teachers and 30 pre-service teachers to investigate how teachers regard, think about, and describe the decisions they make regarding books they share with children. This work occurred in various regions of the United States: the Midwest, and in different parts of the South. Our research began as a qualitative investigation (Glesne, 1999) of how teachers talked about world social problems related to gender, sexuality, class, and race. In our individual university settings and homes, we invited teachers to discuss particular pieces of children's literature that questioned and explored beliefs and assumptions regarding these issues. We engaged teachers in conversations with responses to literature that were not only efferent and aesthetic, as Rosenblatt (1978) encouraged, but also critical (Comber, 2001; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1997; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004), gathering both written and audiotaped responses from our participants.

Analysis of the data occurred throughout the study. Through recursive readings of interview and literature discussion transcripts, reflective writings, written responses, and field notes, key themes began to emerge across the data sets (Merriam, 1998). Our findings suggest both practicing and pre-service teachers shared a discomfort for bringing issues of violence, religion, sexuality, race, and homelessness into classroom reading and conversation. These findings are affirmed by Nodelman & Reimer, (2003) and Wollman-Bonilla, (1998). Teachers' hesitations, fears, beliefs, and values about what was appropriate for children and what was not come forward in the anecdotes we share here.

In their role in determining appropriateness, teachers also confronted their own social constraints about world social issues. Many were dissatisfied with the increasing tensions and demands to use reading and language arts textbooks in their classrooms and wanted to learn more about critical readings of texts and ways to discuss children's literature with elementary students. Our results suggest that although many teachers affirm children's literature containing social issues as transformational events for themselves, that same transforming practice is not considered appropriate within elementary classrooms. In the next section, we will discuss our findings.

Avoiding Controversy

Individually and collectively, we looked closely at the conversations we had with teachers and pre-service teachers. Our findings suggest our participants were often responding as a means to avoid controversy. Tension and anxiety were woven into responses during discussions with both pre-service and in-service teachers. As one in-service teacher said after reading *NightJohn* (Paulsen, 1995), "This book is too graphic!" We also found that

both pre-service and in-service teachers questioned our literature choices at times as well. For example, realizing the next assigned text was *Babymouse: Queen of the World* by Jennifer and Matthew Holm (2005), one pre-service teacher asked, "Why are we reading a comic book?" Upon discovering the avoidance tactics, we paused to interrogate our own stances as researchers and challenged ourselves to continue seeking ways to create rich contexts and develop environments that supported risk taking during our discussions with teachers. We also looked more closely at the ways teachers avoided controversy: through literal responses, distancing themselves, protecting the innocence of the child, and by giving power to the book. We begin with literal responses to texts.

Literal Responses

In many schools, children are accustomed to answering questions in workbooks, on computer-managed reading programs, standardized tests, and too often the questions are literal comprehension questions from the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). Perhaps because of this, children and teachers have become comfortable both asking and answering literal questions; teachers and children can "do school" in this way and then miss opportunities to think about and have rigorous conversations about issues presented in texts. It is easier and less time intensive to recite literal comprehension questions than raise questions that are open to multiple perspectives. It is also easy to attach numbers to questions that ask for one right answer; teachers and parents like this kind of efficiency (Kohn, 2000).

In our work, we found literal responses were commonly the first responses teachers gave when we offered rich texts for discussions. For example, *Piggybook* (Browne, 1990) is a feminist story about a mother who leaves when her husband and sons create a mess and do not help around the house. Browne's illustrations and words provide wonderful opportunities for talk about literary elements such as foreshadowing and characterization and invite conversations about dominant roles in families. After several kindergarten and first grade teachers read this book, they mentioned tensions surrounding the family situation with their students. They commented, "Maybe you could use it as a pre-Mother's Day activity" or "to discuss chores and responsibility" or to "talk about careers." Perhaps not understanding the underlying feminist message or not agreeing with the actions of the protagonist in the book, the teachers discussed ways they knew to be appropriate for school study. We wonder if these teachers found simpler ways to make this reading material appropriate and relevant for their classrooms rather than thinking hard and examining the texts more critically. Our participants may have felt safer talking about motherhood than questioning dominant gender roles.

Beginning with literal understandings and then moving towards ways to "use" texts was a recurring trend

in our data. Other researchers have also found this to be true (Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Raphael, Dampousse, Highfield, & Florio-Ruane, 2001). As Raphael et al. described in their research with teachers, discussions often began with quick aesthetic responses to the literature and moved almost immediately to ways they could use the book in their classrooms. Like the teachers we work with, Raphael's Book Club participants did not easily discard books altogether, but instead chose literal responses as possible ways to use books with students.

We found that literal responses were not limited to picture books; they also occurred with novels. As a way to engage elementary children in book discussions, one group of pre-service teachers read *Randall's Wall* (Fenner, 2000) and wrote pen pal letters to fourth graders about the book. In *Randall's Wall*, a girl named Jean brought the protagonist, Randall, to her home to clean him up because he was physically dirty and smelly. When Jean's mother unexpectedly returned from the grocery store in the middle of the bath, Jean encouraged Randall to replace his own clothes with some from her sister's closet. In the author's words, "For a reason she would have despised if she had recognized them in herself, Mrs. Neary felt comforted by the expensive jeans. Randall looked like the sons of lots of people she knew and dealt with" (pp. 47-48). Issues about class, like the one described here, occur throughout this book and offer opportunities for discussions about privilege and power in the world. The opportunity, however, was missed by this group of pre-service teachers. Just like Mrs. Neary, who saw herself as socially aware and yet lulled by physical appearance, these pre-service teachers avoided asking important questions about class and family violence prevalent in the book. Rather than ask students directly about how a brand of jeans could comfort someone, the pre-service teachers alternatively opted for asking familiar and simple comprehension questions in their correspondence with pen pals: "Who was your favorite character?" And, "What was your favorite part in this book?" The in-service teacher of these fourth grade letter writers, however, was frustrated by the questions the pre-service teachers asked and wrote back to them directly, pleading for more substance in their subsequent letters. In her very direct words to them,

My kids need to think about how people in this book treat one another.

People are poor in this world and we aren't always nice to poor people in this country. I want my students to struggle with this.

This seasoned teacher, with over 25 years of teaching experience, was obviously not afraid to discuss social issues like sexuality, race, and class with her elementary students and wanted to encourage these pre-service teachers to participate or try a more critical approach to questioning in the letters. Her expertise and encouragement helped the pre-service teachers confront their own feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment when probing deeper

world issues with both children and themselves. Her guidance offered new ways of participating in discussions with children that were previously unknown to them.

Distancing

Another common response to literature we found among both in-service and pre-service teachers was the act of distancing by removing themselves from difficult topics. Rather than consider ways to discuss sensitive topics, teachers distanced themselves by speaking from a parent perspective, a collective teacher voice, and a narrative third person voice.

Teachers distanced themselves by claiming that parents would not support discussions about difficult issues in books. After reading *Nightjohn* (Paulsen, 1995), one in-service teacher said, "Parents in my district would never approve of this book. There's too much violence and the 'N' word is used throughout the book." A male high school teacher in the same group discussion agreed, and added, "They talk about breeding in this book. I'm not talking about breeding with somebody else's kids." These teachers felt that sensitive issues surrounding slavery and bondage (like maiming, whipping, and breeding) were issues for parents to discuss with their children, not teachers. A similar parent perspective was taken by another in-service teacher in response to the book *From Slaveship to Freedom Road* (Lester, 1999).

I teach mostly black children. I can imagine they would ask me questions like if I owned a slave. I also think there might be some miscommunication with parents, and they would get mad if I read a book like that.

Discussing books containing the atrocity of slavery was impossible for these white teachers to imagine, and these particular teachers (two females and one male) were reluctant to voice their own beliefs about racism and sexuality and found it easier to distance their responses to texts like these by invoking the power of the parent.

Following the reading of *Piggybook* (Browne, 1990), one pre-service teacher made this broad statement about choosing literature for the classroom:

I would not read any book that deals with a family structure that promoted anything other than a man and woman. If I did, then it would be against my religious point of view, and that might come out. It's the parents' right to discuss things like this, and I would not want to infringe on the rights of parents.

Both in-service and pre-service teachers are hesitant to bring sensitive issues into classroom discussions and disclose or examine personal responses with children. This resistance is justified by the claim that this would "infringe on the rights of parents."

Our data also revealed that teachers distance themselves from social issues in literature by using the collective or authoritative voice of the teacher as expert. After reading *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust*

by Eve Bunting (1989), a story that asks the reader to consider "what would have happened if everyone had stood together at the first sign of evil" (preface page), an in-service teacher responded in this way, "As an educator, one must evaluate information from a high moral standpoint." Invoking the perspective of an educator in this response allows teachers to state their own beliefs and assumptions under the mask of a collective voice. When individuals carry ideologies or assumptions about children (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003) these same assumptions can too easily be carried over into classroom decision-making. Nodelman and Reimer remind teachers to carefully consider their own assumptions about children as they make textual decisions and determine pedagogies for the classroom, for children are often capable of much more than teachers allow. This teacher may have felt a need to protect her students from the atrocities of this horrific historical event. In the role as an educational professional, she felt it was her responsibility to make decisions about suitable topics for students and the Holocaust was not suitable.

Finally, teachers also distanced themselves from books by speaking from a third person or narrative voice, for in this way, reference to one's self was easily avoidable. For example, one pre-service teacher participant believed, "People will always have the choice to be offended. They can choose to be offended about almost anything." In other words, "people" may be offended by books; this teacher uses third person and does not directly state whether she would include herself in this group, or not. We found this stance common in our data as this second exemplar illustrates. In response to *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (Lester, 1999), an in-service teacher wrote:

I think that sometimes people are mistreated today because of their skin color or other reasons like religion. I still think that most people are out for themselves to succeed just like the white men in this book. I think many people do not care if they hurt someone else in doing so.

Again, the teacher masks her own personal response by referencing other people rather than making direct reference to herself.

Protecting the Innocent Child

The third major category to avoid controversy suggested in our data is the recounting of a teacher's role in protecting the innocence of children in classrooms. Teachers' perceptions and insights revealed important clues regarding ways they perceived their roles in creating safe classrooms and establishing student-centered teaching practices.

One pre-service teacher placed "a safe classroom" at the very core of her teaching practices. As she notes, "I take responsibility for the children in my classroom and their learning experience, and I do not want to be held accountable for the obliteration of their innocence. We live in a society that is becoming more and more accepting to the impurities of this world."

Why should we purposely expose our children to these indecencies?

Elements of this comment suggest this teacher's ethical belief that the classroom environment should not reflect the dangerous outside world, and that she has the power to somehow prevent outside influences from breaching classroom walls. Similarly, a third grade teacher discussing *Piggybook* (Browne, 1990) wrote,

I would not use this book in my classroom. Some students live in households like this and may not know any other way. I would not comment on this book because it is not my concern how families conduct their homes.

Reflected in both comments is a justification for what makes a classroom "safe" and the notion that classrooms are neutral spaces and ignoring tough societal issues will protect and keep students from harm. The idea that teachers are responsible for protecting innocent children is inherent in this thinking.

Another trend in our data suggested that teachers are looking for "happy endings" as a way to protect the innocence of childhood when considering texts to share with their students. For example, an in-service teacher wrote this comparison response to *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991) and *A Shelter in Our Car* (Gunning, 2004):

I had more of a feeling of despair as I read this book (*Fly Away Home*) than when I read *Shelter in our Car*. This book deals with the unresolved issue of finding a permanent place to live and the father still looking for an additional job or a different job...I think because the reader is left with no clear resolution to the problem plus the feeling of sadness that the story evokes would make it difficult for my students to grasp.

In this excerpt, the teacher is intent on sharing empathy for the characters and their situations in these texts. At the same time she dismisses *Fly Away Home* as a book she would not choose on the distinguishing feature that children's stories should not contain unresolved conflict.

We also noted a general hesitance to include certain texts with difficult topics because teachers raised issues of appropriateness and relevance in regard to protecting the child. For example, in response to *Fly Away Home*, an in-service teacher who was living in a state severely impacted by Hurricane Katrina said,

Many of the people who lost their homes in those disasters used airports as shelter...I would not use this book in my kindergarten classroom unless I had a student who may be dealing with a homelessness issue. I don't think my kindergarteners would understand the main theme of the book. I think the topic may scare young children.

Again, this excerpt provides an example of a teacher acknowledging potential value of a text while denying access to her students because her assumption was that the theme of the book was too complex for her students.

In contrast, another in-service teacher wrote, "I might have reservations that this might hit too close to home with students in my room..." This teacher indicated by her own proclamations that a difficult topic, which may be personally relevant to students, is off-limits due to their own immediate experience. When we look closely at these comments, they reveal the teachers' position in relation to students as they dictate various aspects of the classroom from the nature of their interactions to what is appropriate to read. The key implication here is that teachers consistently placed students in the position of people who "need protecting." Their responses focused on the concept of appropriateness and relevance, which discredits the student's (possibly quite different) point of view.

A final example occurred after one teacher (and her mother) read *The Jacket* (Clements, 2003). In this story, the protagonist, Phil, wrongly accuses a black boy in his class of stealing his jacket. When Phil discovers his mother gave the jacket to their maid (who is also the accused boy's grandmother) Phil begins to question his own beliefs about race and wonders if he is intolerant. After reading the story an in-service teacher responded, "I think this is an important book. It really made me stop and think about my own feelings of intolerance for people of different ethnicities than my own." When we asked her if she would use this book in her classroom, however, she responded in this way,

I wondered about that, so I gave the book to my mother and asked her to read it. She said there wouldn't be any reason for the children in my school to read this book because they aren't intolerant. Children in other places might need to read the book, but not in 'our' school.

Once again, this illustrates that it may be easier to act as if difficult issues such as intolerance occur in someone else's back yard. If a book like *The Jacket*, however, can raise questions about racism in people who do not believe they are racially intolerant, children will also benefit from reading this book. Protecting children from the ugliness of life seems to be paramount in this decision.

The Power of the Book

Finally, a cornerstone of critical literacy is to examine power relationships and equity issues. In order to address these types of issues, we often ask readers to consider whose voice is heard, whose is not, and who is constrained. The power that is handed over by teachers to a text is a twist on this issue. We explored the ways teachers both give and take away power related to texts. While critical pedagogues want the reading of a text to be a transformational experience, at the same time they are resistant to the notion that a book has inherent power to wield (Freire & Macedo, 1987). The teachers in our study seemed to give books intrinsic power, however, and we speculated as to what it was that gave certain books power regarding

teacher experiences. Teachers seemed to avoid certain texts as if books themselves would lead students to change their behaviors or beliefs. If the potential for change was seen by the teacher as a negative—that text was rejected. For example, after reading *Surviving the Applewhites* (Tolan, 2004) a pre-service teacher commented “I’d be afraid that this book could make kids want to try bad things. Jake Semple smoked and swore and had a bunch of piercings all over his body. Wouldn’t that make kids want to do that same stuff?” Another pre-service teacher said, “If I did read something like that, then it would be like planting a seed that it’s okay.”

The notion that a text holds power in itself is unsettling and not unlike assumptions people carry about television and video games. We believe all experiences with texts are connected to the life experiences of the reader, and it is the reader’s response or “identification with the text” that holds power (Lewis, 2000). Only when a reader connects to a text in some way does the potential for a powerful reading exist, for along with identification comes positioning. We each bring our own life experiences to a text, and the assumptions, beliefs and knowledge we gather from the text is shaped by what we bring to it (Rosenblatt, 1978). Sometimes a text resonates with our experience and sometimes it disrupts our experience and that is where the power balances, in the response of the reader.

In response to *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust* (Bunting, 1989), we offer this in-service teacher’s stance related to the power she affords a text:

The Holocaust is a much more difficult thing for me to approach because of the horrific nature of it. There is not really too much that is acceptable for kids to read and hear. I tend to want to shield the kids from it, but the way this story is written lends itself to thinking about how terrible things happen while the rest of us sit back and watch – while we are relieved that it is not happening to us.

She believes a book has potential to hold power only when the reader unpacks the text and reads between the lines. We suggest that teachers support children in connecting experiences with texts by helping students gather information effectively and develop their ability to research topics when they encounter texts that present experiences outside of their own. As a middle school teacher in our study shared,

Terrible Things is my signature lesson that I share everywhere when teaching the Holocaust. It is very powerful. We then discuss how this book is certainly not just an easy children’s book, and that there is so much more to it.

Looking Back and Looking Ahead

As graduate students, we were introduced to the world of literary criticism and began to think about ways to help teachers take more critical stances to topics about race, class, gender, and sexuality in school and professional

development settings. It has been a difficult and frustrating road at times: teachers have resisted our offerings, refused to enact this type of thinking in their classrooms, and declined our invitations for conversation. Because we believe schools are locations where social change can occur, however, we are willing to risk our own discomfort. We have talked often about strategies for helping teachers negotiate topics like these with less tension and more confidence. We must remember also that teachers are only able to respond in ways or Discourses that are open to them (Gee, 1996). If they have not been given professional development opportunities to think about how literature, discussions, and life comprise forms of power, they will have difficulties engaging in discussions such as these. Our continuing work with teachers is important because changes in knowledge and understanding take time.

In our work, creating a safe environment for discussion has been a challenge yet considered crucial in our relationships with teachers. We believe we also mask our own feelings about texts at times in order to encourage our study participants to speak their minds. We also know, however, that considering multiple perspectives opens the doors of possibility for deeper understanding, and negotiate our role in an effort for all participants to gain from conversations about books. We continue to work toward understanding the differences between distancing that is helpful and distancing that is avoidance or denial. We have also discovered the teachers we work with take more risks during discussions if we build relationships with them first, and this does not happen in only a few months. We recognize that change is a gradual, on-going, and sometimes painful process. Change cannot be accomplished in a one-time professional development session (Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan, 1996). Given opportunities for sustained and intensive support and dialogue with other education partners in professional development settings, we believe deeper understanding and richer responses would ground their practice of teaching and learning.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this piece, a present day issue confronting classrooms today is the standardization of instruction and evaluation. Teachers and students feel the authoritative pressures of a mandated curriculum that came from far outside their individual classroom experiences. Policymakers’ decisions to standardize curriculum so all students will learn equally well occurs with no concern or interest in what happens in individual classrooms. These decisions circumvent and deprofessionalize teacher thinking and decision-making (Wong, 2006). A classroom curriculum that comes from teacher and student knowledge and experience is more effective and motivational (Silva & Kucer, 1997), but teachers need opportunities to talk to one another and plan instruction such as this in order for it to be truly meaningful to each unique student body.

What we know about teaching, even after all of our combined years of teaching, is full of tensions and

contradictions. At times, each of the participants in this study struggled with thinking and discussing topics. We hope these teachers walk away knowing more about themselves after considering the difficult topics we raise here, just as we do. Teachers must be able to articulate why they choose the materials and practices they choose for their classrooms, and we believe teacher educators can help them do that.

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