

# Chapter 1

## Setting the Context: A Critical Take on Using Books in the Classroom

*Patricia: Are you sure you looked?*

*Alexandro: Everywhere in there!*

*Patricia: She [the librarian] even helped me. She said, "I guess we don't have any."*

*Alexandro: Did you tell her that's not fair?*

It was November. My kindergarten students and I (Vivian Vasquez) had been together for three months and had gotten to know one another quite well. During this time I had attempted to construct a curriculum and make use of pedagogy to create opportunities for us to dialogue about diversity using the varied linguistic and cultural experiences and resources that this ethnically diverse group of children brought to the classroom.

The brief conversation between Patricia and Alexandro took place one day after returning from a visit to our school library. They had been looking for a book on the Philippines as one way to support Emma, a new student in the class, whose family had just moved to Canada from the Philippines. Their quest was met with frustration when they learned there were no books with characters who might be Filipino, nor were there any resource books on the Philippines. In a sense these children were learning about the notion of being "other," of not having spaces and opportunities to belong. Patricia and Alexandro's frustration led me to suggest a class project focusing on the question, Do we see ourselves in books that are in our school library? A topic such as this may seem too difficult or

complex for young children. For some children this may be true, however, from the beginning of the school year my students had available to them more powerful ways of talking about the world as I framed my teaching from a critical literacy perspective. This is also true for the other students and teachers you will meet in this book. The critical literacy perspective I speak of here is similar to the perspective suggested by Flint and Riordan-Karlsson (2001) in their Kids InSight book *Buried Treasures in the Classroom: Using Hidden Influences to Enhance Literacy Teaching and Learning*—to encourage conversation related to social issues. Barbara Comber’s definition of critical literacy is applicable. She states that critical literacies include practicing the use of language in powerful ways to get things done in the world, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice (Comber, 2001). Critical literacy is also about imagining thoughtful ways of thinking about reconstructing and redesigning texts and images to convey different, more socially just and equitable messages that have real-life effects in the world.

The project was an important one that raised questions of moral responsibility and the role that our class could play in negotiating new, more equitable social spaces.

Our school was pre-K to eighth grade with approximately 800 students. It was located in a middle income neighborhood in a suburb of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. In our class of 18 students, we had 11 different ethnicities represented including children from Malta and Peru. The children and I were therefore disturbed when we searched through the shelves of our school library over the next few weeks and discovered

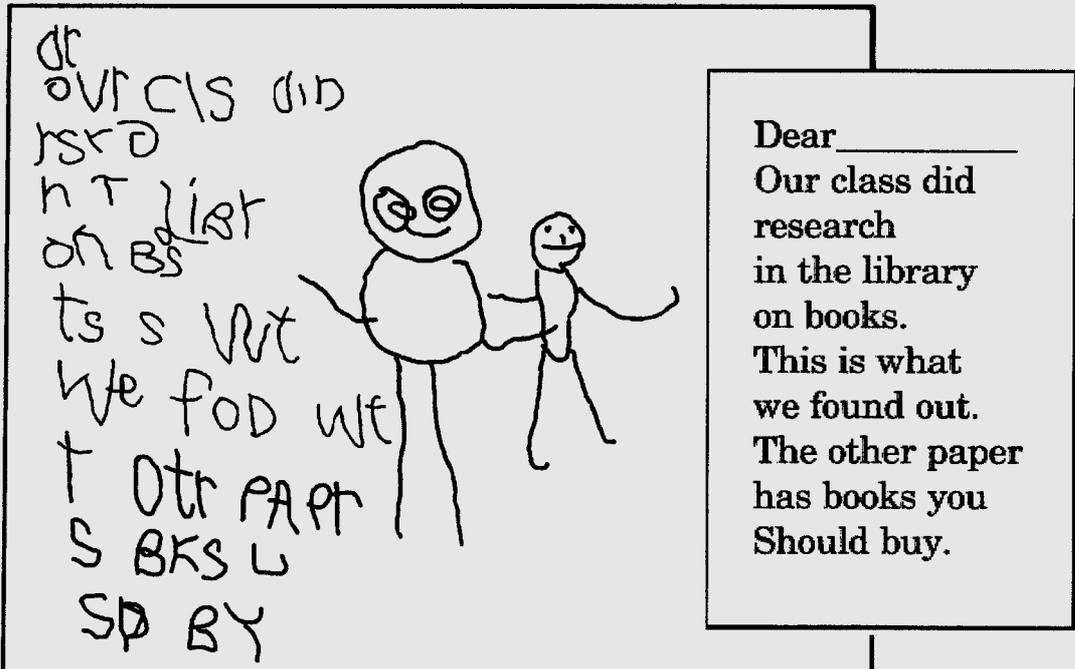
- there were no books on the Philippines,
- the books on Peru were outdated and were published in the 1970s, and
- there were no books on Malta.

Earlier in the school year, I talked to the children about acting on issues that were of concern to us; that is, doing something about problems we face in the school community and beyond in order to contribute to building more democratic ways of being and doing at our school. At that time we made a list of possible types of actions including finding out as much as we could about an issue in order to discuss and analyze it in a critical way.

We talked about writing letters, doing research to find more information on a topic, and asking to meet with individuals involved to make our concerns public. We also looked at our own ways of doing and saying things and how we may have contributed to existing problems by not acting on them.

To address our concern regarding the lack of culturally diverse books in our school library, we engaged in a conversation regarding possible solutions. One suggestion made by a group of children was to write a letter to the librarian (see Figure 1). The letter makes public the findings of the students' discoveries in the library. Along with the letter, we attached a list of books with characters from diverse ethnicities and backgrounds and bilingual books that could be purchased for our school library. This list was created by one of the boys in the class together with his parents.

**Figure 1**  
**Letter to the Librarian**



From Vasquez, V. (2000). Building community through social action. *School Talk*, 5(4), p. 2.

The librarian was very receptive to the letter. When presented with the findings, she appeared genuinely disturbed. Like many people, she had not thought about the marginalization of certain individuals and groups of students when they are unable to “see themselves” in books and other texts used in school. She immediately worked on ordering books to address our concerns. She also began rethinking the decisions she made regarding which books to display based on who is represented and not represented by those books.

As part of our project, we created a newsletter outlining the work that we had done. This newsletter was taken home by students and was one way of filtering our class inquiry into some of the children’s homes. From the newsletter, Mena and her family began to explore how different cultures are represented by the way in which books are displayed at local bookstores. She and her parents talked to the manager of their neighborhood bookstore, emphasizing the need for books that represent diverse cultures to be available all year, not just for special events such as Black History Month or Women’s History Month. Anthony and his mother questioned why children’s literature was hidden away in the back corner of their local bookstore, and why a computer to locate books was not available in the children’s section as it was in other areas of the store. It was amazing to learn about ways that my students had taken what they had learned in the classroom into their homes to engage in projects with their parents.

## *Reflection Point 1.1* \_\_\_\_\_

This first Reflection Point is deliberately lengthier than the others in this book. The questions that follow are meant to provide a contextual basis for reading the remainder of the book.

1. Obtain a journal in which to write any thoughts, comments, connections, or questions as you read this book. Begin by reflecting on your own experience as a young learner. What kinds of books do you recall reading while you were an elementary school student? In what ways did the books that were made

available to you reflect your own experiences? In what ways were the books that were made available to you inconsistent with your own experiences? What were some of the ways that you talked about these books? What purpose did they serve in your life?

2. Make a list of all the children in your classroom, noting their cultural backgrounds. Then walk around the classroom paying close attention to the children's available literature. Write about how closely the books in your classroom reflect the cultural makeup of your students.
  3. Together with your students, make a list of books that you feel should be added to your classroom or school library to ensure that all the children in the class are reflected in the books available to them. It would be very useful to add to this list throughout the school year.
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## **How This Book Was Conceptualized**

This book began from a common interest among a group of educators to find ways of bringing a critical dimension to existing classroom curriculum and from an interest in children and books written for children. It represents a collaboration among educators who are connected with life in elementary school classrooms. I, Vivian Vasquez, am the common denominator for each of the other five collaborators of this book. I met each of them through study groups or graduate school courses. My voice (Vivian) dominates this chapter along with chapter 2 and chapter 6 more so than in the others primarily because I was the one who proposed writing about our collective experiences with critical literacy and books. From here on "I" will refer to me, and "we" will refer to the thoughts of my collaborators and me as a group. The third person is used when referring to the work done by one of my five collaborators, and italics are used to indicate personal thoughts from each.

I am currently an assistant professor at the School of Education at American University where I work closely with classroom teachers and preschool- and elementary school-age children. However, previous to this I was a preschool and elementary school teacher for 14 years who explored ways of making curriculum critical. Susan C. Adamson is the program director at Indiana Partnership for Young Writers. Lee Heffernan is a doctoral candidate at Indiana University, Bloomington, as well as a public school teacher. Michael R. Muise is a former elementary school teacher and is now an assistant professor at Wayne State University. Susan, Lee, and Mike have been exploring notions of critical literacy for at least five years. David Chiola-Nakai is a teacher librarian in an elementary school in Canada. He was introduced to critical literacy while taking a master's course more than six years ago. Also represented in this book is work done by Janice Shear, a veteran elementary school teacher, also from Canada.

This book represents the varied experiences of my collaborators and me as we attempted to move our students' responses to text beyond the traditional "I like the book" by putting a critical edge on kindergarten to sixth-grade students' talk about books and other texts. It is not about literature study per se but about using books differently in combination with other texts to create spaces for critical literacy. It consists of detailed critical literacy events and instances from our classrooms, as well as practical classroom strategies and annotated lists of children's literature that can be used as one source to encourage and support critical conversations. The names of colleagues and students that appear in this volume are pseudonyms.

Even though we each worked with children of different ages and, at the time this book was conceived, had different experiences with critical literacy, we learned from one another and used one another's experiences as a way of pushing our own teaching practices. Those of us who worked with younger children drew from the work done by those of us who worked with older children. We adopted and adapted one another's teaching practices to best support our individual teaching contexts. In each of our settings we did not worry so much about leveling books but considered what sorts of work we could accomplish with a particular book or part of a book. This is based on our shared belief that what is

deemed inappropriate for one child may be perfectly appropriate for another. We see this as a matter of knowing our students and the cultural capital they bring to the classroom. Bourdieu (1991) refers to cultural capital as cultural or social ways of being or doing that are objectified or embodied in the individual as a type of habitus or as a sort of publicly recognized credential.

My collaborators and I hope that our stories intersect with experiences you have had and that they lead you to consider engaging in critical literacies in your context.

## **Using Critical Literacies to Get Things Done in the World**

In the opening vignette, we entered my (Vivian's) kindergarten classroom where Patricia and Alexandro led the charge for changing the kinds of books that were made available in the school library. As they engaged in this act, they helped to break the pattern of privileging some students (those students who find themselves in books) while marginalizing others (those students, like Emma, whose experiences are not represented in the books available in the school library).

In a selective review of literature, Comber (1992) identified three different principles that guide approaches to critical literacy. She found that in classrooms where a critical literacy position is advocated, teachers

- Reposition students as researchers of language.

To do this, students are given opportunities to understand and learn how language works in the world by engaging in analysis such as discussing how different combinations of words convey different kinds of messages.

- Respect student resistance and explore minority culture constructions of literacy and language.

To do this, teachers provide space in the curriculum to address the diverse needs of students, including ensuring the curriculum speaks to the cultural ways of being of the class members and the varied discourses (experiences with literacy, literate ways of being, and language use) that those students bring to the classroom.

- Problematize classroom and public texts.

To do this, teachers help students to interrupt and analyze texts that are often considered natural or neutral. For example, students and teachers together look closely at the illustrations and choice of words used in texts such as books and magazine advertisements.

One of the ways that my collaborators and I initiated the children we worked with into a socially critical approach to literacy was by problematizing classroom and public texts and by repositioning students as researchers of language. It is our work using literature in combination with other texts to introduce critical conversations in our classrooms and to construct social action projects that is the focus of this book. Specifically, the ways we used books on four particular fronts will be presented.

1. Pairing Everyday Texts With Texts Written for Children

Everyday texts are real-world texts that can be found as part of daily living. These include news clips, advertisement fliers, posters, greeting cards, and other such items. In this book you will learn about ways that these texts can be paired with texts written for children as one way to begin to negotiate critical literacy in the classroom.

2. Focusing on Social Issues by Bringing the Outside World Into the Classroom

Social issues are real-world issues that are important to children. Later in the book you will read about ways that classroom teachers have created spaces or opportunities for taking up these issues as part of the classroom curriculum.

3. Using Children's Literature to Unpack Social Issues in the School Community

Books are one of many tools that can be used to create space to discuss social issues in the classroom. In the following chapters we will share some of the ways that classroom teachers have used books along with other texts as a starting point for taking up and analyzing such issues.

4. Using Children's Literature Critically in the Content Areas

Often, critical literacy has been discussed, written about, and promoted as something to be done as part of the literacy curriculum.

Later in the book, Michael Muise will share his experience in beginning to consider the role that critical literacy can play in the math curriculum.

Each of chapters 2 through 5 focuses on one of these fronts. Common to all chapters, however, is the way that each of my collaborators and I, together with our students, used books in some way to create space for taking thoughtful social action. That is, in each chapter we demonstrate ways in which we worked with our students on changing or addressing particular inequities in each of our own settings. It is important to note that while working from one front it is possible, and in fact likely, that other fronts would also be addressed.

## **Children's Literature in Elementary School Settings**

Children's literature has played a major role in elementary school classrooms for years. The widespread use of literature across the school curricula has created multiple opportunities for children and their teachers to interact with these literacy texts in a variety of ways, including critically reading books, as Patricia, Alexandro, and my other kindergarten students did when they raised concern regarding the absence of particular kinds of books in our school library.

Because this is a book that uses critical literacy as a framework for talking about teaching and learning, I am compelled, if only briefly, to take up the very term *children's literature* and the tensions it creates. "Unlike terms like 'children's art' or 'children's games,' which express a sense of ownership on the part of children, 'children's literature' does not" (Rudd, 1999, p. 40). Adults in the children's market write most of the books labeled *children's literature*. However, there are growing, but still limited, accounts of young people writing for other young people such as Benjamin Lebert's *Crazy* or Alejandro Gac-Artigas's *Yo Alejandro* (see Appendix A for examples of books written for young people by young people). For the purposes of this book, *children's literature* refers to books written for the children's market. I acknowledge that the term *children's*

*literature* is not unproblematic; however, it is used here simply because it is a term most common to educators.

The take on critical literacy presented here is not about the books per se, but what is done using books in different contexts and in combination with other texts such as posters and advertisements, as well as the kinds of perspectives brought to bear on talk about books. It is about creating spaces or opportunities for looking at the ways texts and images are constructed and constructive; in other words, how books are produced and how books position readers in particular ways by conveying messages such as what boys can do versus what girls can do. It is about creating opportunities for critical conversations. Flint and Riordan-Karlsson refer to this work as making available different social positionings to students as they engage with texts: "Social position considers how peers perceive each other as members of the learning community and as viable partners for specific literacy events" (2001, p. 5). Texts refer to books and everyday print and media publications such as magazine articles, advertisement fliers, and television commercials. Further explanation of everyday texts appears later in this chapter and in chapter 2.

## **Working From a Theory of Language and Learning**

The opening vignette offered a number of important insights into teaching and learning from a critical literacy perspective. When I asked Patricia and Alexandro why they felt it was important to have books on the Philippines or books that included characters that look Filipino, they offered two reasons. First, they said that having books on the Philippines was one way for them to learn about a country, and second, if there were no books with Filipino-looking characters, then it might be harder for Emma to "tell her stories." When asked to clarify what "telling her stories" meant, they explained, "That means that Emma can say like in my home or like when this happened to me or that happened to me or that's not what I think and if there's no books with Philippines people then it'll be hard to say that." They continued by suggesting, "it isn't fair that other people are in books and Emma isn't." In other words, Patricia and Alexandro recognized that books present different kinds of realities:

providing spaces for readers to connect their own experiences and understanding for purposes of reaffirming those experiences and understandings, or for taking issue with the realities that are presented for them. Further, they recognize that particular students' experiences and understandings are marginalized when they do not find themselves in books or when the realities presented do not represent their experiences.

Patricia and Alexandro are developing a critical perspective in the way that they use language to critique and in the way that they critique the language and images in books. How did they come to this perspective? In a sense, they have come to learn how to use language to critique in great part due to the critical discourses or analytical ways of being that have been made available to them in the classroom. The ways of being I refer to are similar to those used by the other teachers who collaborated with me on this book. Each of the six of us has worked to some degree within a framework similar to that proposed by Harste (2001) in his Halliday Plus Model of Language Learning (see Figure 2).

### **Halliday Plus Model of Language Learning**

The Halliday Plus Model can be used as a framework to consider what kinds of literate beings we want our students to become in the world. It builds on what we already know about language, making use of what has worked and problematizing what hasn't worked. It is based on a belief that literacy is socially constructed, and that when different ways of being are made available, literacy can be reconstructed. It begs the questions, What discourses maintain certain social practices? For what purpose? and To whose advantage? It also builds on the notion of individuals being multiliterate—that there isn't just one literacy but different literacies that allow different access in a variety of contexts and spaces in the world. In a practical sense, this means that it is not enough for children to learn language, to learn about language, and to learn through language, but that children also need to learn to use language to critique (Harste, 2001). According to Harste,

the ability to sound out words and make meaning from texts makes children good consumers rather than good citizens. To be truly literate, children need to understand how texts work and that they as literate beings have options in terms of how they are going to respond to a particular text in a given setting. (2001, p. 2)

**Figure 2**  
**Halliday Plus Model**

<p><b>Learning Language</b></p> <p>Using language and other sign systems as a meaning-making process.</p> <p>Examples of using language to learn.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read-aloud</li> <li>• Shared reading</li> <li>• Partner reading</li> <li>• Readers Theatre</li> <li>• Independent reading and writing</li> <li>• Writer's notebook</li> <li>• Big Books</li> <li>• Journals</li> <li>• Reading logs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Learning About Language</b></p> <p>Understanding how texts operate and how they are coded.</p> <p>Examples of teaching practices that help students learn about language.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching letter-sound relationships</li> <li>• Comprehension strategies</li> <li>• Minilessons</li> <li>• Demonstrations</li> <li>• Focused lessons</li> <li>• Class charts</li> </ul>
<p><b>Learning Through Language</b></p> <p>Using reading and writing as tools and toys for learning about the world.</p> <p>Examples of teaching practices that help children to learn through language.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using text sets</li> <li>• Reflective journals</li> <li>• Literature study</li> <li>• Inquiry or focused study</li> <li>• Sketch to stretch</li> <li>• Process drama</li> </ul>	<p><b>Learning to Use Language to Critique</b></p> <p>Using language to question what seems normal and natural as well as to redesign and create alternate social worlds.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social action projects</li> <li>• Building off everyday texts and social issues.</li> <li>• Using texts that provide opportunities for interrogating the word and the world.</li> </ul>

From Harste, J.C. (2001). The Halliday Plus Model. In K. Egawa and J. Harste, *Balancing the literacy curriculum: A new vision*. *School Talk*, 7(1), p. 2.

**Figure 3**  
**Exploring Ways in Which Language Is Used in the Classroom**

Things that I do to teach language.	Things that I do to teach about language.
Things that I do to help my students learn through language.	Things that I do to help children use language to critique.

## *Reflection Point 1.2* \_\_\_\_\_

Use the chart in Figure 3 or re-create it in your journal to situate your own literacy teaching by noting in what ways you are using language in your classroom.

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## **Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model**

As we reflected on and analyzed our observations, we made use of another theoretical tool, namely, Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model (refer to *Reading Online* at <http://www.readingonline.org/research/lukefreebody.html> for more information about the model). In the model, Luke and Freebody (1999) assert that literacy is never neutral, that literacy is always situated within a series of ideologies or beliefs that shape what we do. While developing their model, Luke and Freebody examined existing and proposed literacy curricula and pedagogical strategies. They state that effective literacy draws from a repertoire of practices that allow learners, as they engage in reading and writing activities, to participate in various "families of literate practices." Luke and Freebody use the term *practices* to denote work that is actually done by literate beings in classrooms and beyond as an indication that these are negotiated, carried out, and achieved in everyday contexts unlike terms such as *schemata* or *competencies*, which denote a more individual, psychological model of literacy. In the Four Resources Model, four dynamic and fluid "families of (social) practices" are described.

### 1. Code-Breaking Practices

These practices refer to having access to the skills required to break the code of written texts by recognizing and using fundamental features and architecture, including alphabet, sounds in words, spelling, and structural conventions and patterns.

### 2. Practices That Provide Opportunities to Participate With Text

These practices involve participating in understanding and composing meaningful written, visual, and spoken texts, taking into account each text's interior meaning systems in relation to a reader's available knowledge and experiences of other cultural discourses, texts, and meaning systems.

### 3. Practices for Using Text

These practices involve using texts functionally by knowing about and acting on the different cultural and social functions that various texts perform inside and outside school, and understanding that these functions shape the way texts are structured, their tone, their degree of formality, and their sequence of components.

#### 4. Practices That Create Space for the Critical Analysis of Text

These practices involve the critical analysis and transformation of texts by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral—that they represent particular points of views while silencing others and influence people’s ideas—and that their designs and discourses can be critiqued and redesigned in novel and hybrid ways.

Each family of practices is needed for literacy learning, but none in isolation is sufficient. Each of the four is inclusive with each being integral to the achievement of the others.

In the 1970s and 1980s, psycholinguistic and schema theory emphasized reader-text interactions, drawing attention to “text-meaning practices” or, more specifically, the construction of a reader who used textual and personal resources to coproduce a meaningful reading. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, sociolinguistic and sociosemiotic theory focused attention on language in use during which reading was viewed in terms of what it did, or could accomplish, pragmatically in the real world.

Currently, Luke and Freebody assert that reading should be seen as a nonneutral form of cultural practice, one that positions readers in advantageous and disadvantageous ways. They argue that readers need to be able to interrogate the assumptions and ideologies that are embedded in text as well as the assumptions that they, as sociocultural beings, bring to the text. This leads to asking questions such as, Whose voice is heard? Who is silenced? Whose reality is presented? Whose reality is ignored? Who is advantaged? Who is disadvantaged? These sorts of questions open spaces for analyzing the discourses or ways of being that maintain certain social practices over others.

### Reflection Point 1.3

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In your journal, reflect on your current theory of language and learning. How does what you do in the classroom reflect what you believe?

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## **Rethinking Balanced Literacy**

While using any model of literacy such as the Halliday Plus Model or Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model, described previously, it is easy to fall into the trap of using such a model to balance a literacy program by doing equal amounts of everything or doing a little of this and a little of that. Rather, what we propose is for you to use such models as frameworks within which to situate what you are already doing in your classrooms in order to reveal what work needs to be done. This would mean asking yourself the following: In what ways am I already helping my students to learn language, to learn about language, to learn through language, and to use language to critique? Then build a literacy curriculum based on your responses.

## **How This Book Is Organized**

It is important to reemphasize that my collaborators and I use books as only one of many tools for constructing critical literacies. However, books alone, even those books referred to as social issues texts (Harste et al., 2000)—such as texts that address topics of race, class, or gender—are useful as tools to do critical literacy work only in so far as they can be vehicles for discussing issues of power and control. Simply having these books available is not enough. What makes them social issues texts are the differences that the discourses or belief-laden ways of being and talking have on our discussion about those books and the experiences that influence those discussions, along with who is able to participate, in what ways, for what purposes, and to what ends. It is most advantageous to use such books in combination with other texts as a way of helping students to understand that texts are never neutral and that they are constructed for particular reasons and audiences.

In the following chapters you will be shown examples of how books have been paired with other texts, including everyday texts and media reports, to explore various topics and issues. What are central in each of the stories are the issues that the children raise about the world and the difference critical literacy discourse makes in each context. My collaborators and I also used children's literature to create space in our own

contexts for making available to children more powerful discourses from which to frame discussion about books and everyday life events.

The focus of chapter 2 is on using everyday texts such as news reports and posters in combination with children's books to engage in social action. I share work I did with kindergarten students, while David Chiola-Nakai shares work done with his sixth-grade students.

In chapter 3 you will hear about Lee Heffernan and her third-grade students as they use a six-step strategy developed by Lee to take up particular social issues such as racism, using what Harste refers to as "social issues texts."

In chapter 4 you will learn about Susan Adamson's use of process drama and books written for children as a way to interrogate social inequities in an elementary school where she worked with seven third graders. You also will hear about work done by Janice Shear's fifth-grade students with regard to using a particular children's book in combination with process writing to construct meaning about inequities in their lives.

In chapter 5, Mike Muise sheds light on the work he did with fifth- and sixth-grade students when they used a picture book as a springboard for engaging critical literacies in the math curriculum.

Finally, discussed in chapter 6 is the notion of using language to critique as a common element underlying the work outlined in this book.

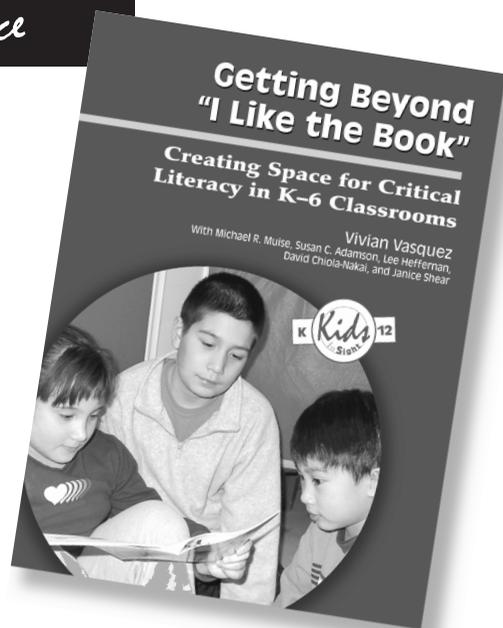
I hope that the version of classroom life that my collaborators and I present in the following chapters can complement or encourage the vision you have for engaging in powerful ways with texts in order to create spaces for a more equitably just and fair world for children.

Available at the IRA Convention Marketplace

**Use children's literature  
to teach critical literacy  
in your elementary classroom.**

**Getting Beyond "I Like the Book"  
Creating Space for Critical Literacy  
in K-6 Classrooms**

Vivian Vasquez, with Michael R. Muise, Susan C. Adamson,  
Lee Heffernan, David Chiola-Nakai, and Janice Shear



Discover the potential of children's literature as a tool to teach grade K-6 children to think critically and act on social issues.

This new book tells the stories of eight educators who used critical literacy discourse to frame classroom conversations about children's literature, prompting students from diverse backgrounds to critically examine the meaning of the texts they read. By putting this critical edge on children's talk about books, the teachers enabled students to analyze and act on social issues that emerged from their conversations. Central to each chapter are the issues that students raised about the world and the difference that critical literacy discourse makes in the classroom.

*Getting Beyond "I Like the Book"* shows critical literacy in action through many classroom vignettes and offers a variety of other resources that are the hallmarks of the Kids InSight series, including Reflection Points, examples of students' work, annotated booklists, and information boxes. In addition, the classroom strategies and annotated lists of children's literature will help you encourage and support your students' critical conversations.

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