Creating Classrooms

K–8 Reading and Writing with an Edge

Mitzi Lewison
Christine Leland
Jerome C. Harste

Foreword by Linda Christensen

Chapter 4

Cultural Resources Using Children's Literature to Get Started with Critical Literacy

Vignette

*How Critical Picture Books Changed a First-Grade Classroom**

Christine H. Leland and Kim Huber

When Kim Huber finally decided to read *The Lady in the Box* (McGovern, 1997) to her first graders, she was not convinced that they would get much out of a book about homelessness. She wondered what they would think about the main character, a woman attempting to survive the winter living in a cardboard box. Kim had been teaching first grade for five years when she was introduced to critical literacy in a graduate class. She had never considered the idea of reading books about tough social issues in her classroom and was intrigued—but not convinced that she wanted to discuss what might be seen as controversial topics with children. Two years later, as she considered topics for her master's thesis, she was still interested and wanted to explore the idea further. At the recommendation of a faculty advisor, she joined with teachers who were already investigating critical literacy as part of a professional development study group.

Teachers and university researchers in this study group came together each month to share their investigations of critical literacy in K–8 classrooms. Participants had access to a library of critical picture books and adolescent novels that they could take back to their classrooms. These

* Adapted from C. Leland & J. Harste J. with K. Huber. Out of the box: Critical literacy in a first grade classroom. *Language Arts*. Copyright 2005 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

books typically focused on difficult social issues and involved situations where characters were marginalized in some way as a result of the existing systems of power. Though the stories rarely had happy endings where all of the problems got solved, they all left readers thinking about fairness and what could or should be done differently in the future. The study group Kim joined consisted mainly of urban teachers, and she initially felt out of place since she taught in a rural setting and had no racial diversity in her classroom. Many of the books being explored by the urban teachers focused on racism, and Kim wondered if her White students would be able to connect to these stories.

As it turned out, Kim was in for some surprises. Though she initially worried that her students would not be able to make personal connections to stories that addressed subjects like homelessness, racism, and war, what she discovered was that they made stronger connections to these books than to the "normal, happy books" she usually read. And even though she was not surprised that their awareness of social issues showed considerable growth when she started to read books that focused on these topics, she did not expect to find that the children would start to treat each other with more compassion and understanding. She was also surprised to find that they put considerably more effort into their written and artistic responses, took on multiple perspectives, and made lots of intertextual connections when they were reacting to these books. Since she did not have any plausible explanation for what she was observing, Kim made this her personal inquiry project. She had many questions to consider: Why did books like *The Lady in the Box* seem to have such a different effect on her children? Could it be that her classroom became a different place when she started sharing the social issues books at story time? These questions and many others fueled Kim's inquiry into the role that critical literacy might be playing in the evolving culture of her classroom.

One of the first patterns Kim noticed was an increase in the children's awareness of social issues. She described how her school had been collecting items for the local food pantry since just after Thanksgiving. She observed that the emphasis seemed to be put on collecting more than other schools in the district so that the school could retain the title of being the most responsive to the needs of others. The children heard reminders each morning and right before going home for the day. There was even a contest set up to see which class could bring in the most items. Kim noted that her children had been bringing in items since that first day and would often mention they thought they would win. When they made these statements, she countered with comments that had to do with how many people they would help with the food, but she felt that her message was not getting through to the children. During the final week of the project, several children announced that their parents said they could not bring in anything else. Then she read *The Lady in the Box*. The very next day, the children came in loaded down with more items. No one made a comment about winning, but instead they talked of how the food would be used by people who did not have enough to eat. What really amazed Kim was that it had taken 15 days to collect 90 items, but in just three days, the children went on to collect a total of 205 items. What was even more impressive to her was the change in the children's attitudes. Instead of looking to win, they now seemed to begin focusing on helping others.

Kim noticed further evidence of the children's growing awareness of social issues after reading *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991) to the class. This is another book about homelessness and tells the story of a father and son who live in an airport. On the 100th day of school, Kim assigned the writing topic that she always assigns on this day: "If I had one hundred dollars, I would..." About two thirds of the class wrote the usual responses such as, "If I had $100, I would biu me a hors. I alwas wuntit a hors" and "If I had $100, I would by a Voltswagin jetu. Win I groe up

I would praktis driving it." At the same time, however, Kim was surprised to discover was that the issue of homelessness popped up in one third of the children's responses. For example, one child wrote, "If I had $100, I would give pepele mony to by a hause. I wont to be nise to other pepel that don't have homes." Another wrote, "If I had $100 I would give the homelis pepol my mone because I like to give." A third child wrote, "If I had $100, I would by them stuff for the homeless people."

In addition to expressing a desire to help homeless people like the ones in the books Kim had shared with them, the children also began to ask questions about why these people were homeless in the first place. They noted that the characters in both books used to have homes but that in each case, something happened to change this situation. Dorrie from *The Lady in the Box* lost her home when she lost her job, and the boy in the airport in *Fly Away Home* lost his home when his mother died. Many of the children were surprised and indignant to learn that people could lose their homes for something that was not their fault. Some made connections to times in their own lives when someone lost a job or a working family member died or moved away. One child argued eloquently that people need to have homes while they are looking for new or better jobs, and another asked why other people did not help them find homes. Phrases like "it's not fair" and "how are people supposed to live?" came up many times during the discussions of these books.

Further discussions about fairness came up after Kim shared the book *So Far from the Sea* (Bunting, 1998) with her students. This is a story about Japanese American citizens who were forced to live in internment camps after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In this case, Kim gave the children time to talk about the story and the vivid illustrations before inviting them to respond through art as well. She was surprised to see how much attention they put into recreating many unpleasant details of the camp. The children's depictions of high guard towers, barbed wire, and guns might have reflected the shock of discovering that kids their own age were taken from their homes and sent far away. Kim noted that though her students would usually "slap any old thing down" to complete a drawing assignment, this one generated a level of energy and concern that she had not observed previously. In this case many children waited patiently to look at the book and took the time and effort to erase and redraw until they were satisfied with their pictures.

By the end of the year, Kim saw many changes in her children's level of critical awareness. She wrote in her journal:

> In my wildest dreams, I would never have thought my students would have come so far in just one school year. At the beginning of the year, they simply saw a book as being for their enjoyment, like a Disney experience. They now look critically at texts, looking for clues into the meaning the author intended. They have examined books for hidden assumptions and have looked at how the readers are being positioned through these texts.

Kim also considered the role that books about racism had played in acquainting her rural children with issues of diversity that often seemed invisible in their monocultural setting. "Without exposure to race, how would my children ever get past the differences to see what is similar? And in a small, white town, they might be adults before they know someone who is not white. By that time, after going so long, it will be hard to tear down the fences of mistrust of someone who looks different. How much more important it becomes in a rural area like this to expose the children to other groups."

What Can We Learn from Kim's Experience?

When Kim first joined the study group, she had many doubts and fears. She worried that focusing on critical literacy might not be appropriate for her children, and she did not know how she would fit yet another instructional area into an already crowded first-grade curriculum. As the year went on, she realized that critical literacy is appropriate for all children, and she found ways to include critical conversations in her daily routine without making any major program changes. Instead, she was able to make subtle changes in her own practice that opened up spaces for discussing books and social issues. We want to suggest that Kim's professional growth resulted from her willingness to challenge two traditional views that tend to be dominant discourses in both schools and the larger culture. First, she challenged the view that literacy is only a question of decoding and making meaning. She continued to teach phonics and comprehension with the reading program mandated by her district, but she also started asking questions that encouraged critical thinking: "Whose story is this? Whose voice is heard? Whose voice isn't heard? What do you think the author wants you to think?" Second, she challenged what many teachers and parents perceive as common sense regarding appropriate subject matter for story time. This view positions children as needing protection from complexity and unpleasant topics. As a result, the common-sense approach leads teachers and parents to choose stories that have simple plot lines and happily-ever-after endings. In making a conscious effort to read books and to engage children in conversations that did not follow the common-sense philosophy, Kim demonstrated how individual teachers can outgrow their former selves. Despite the wall of commercial programs that surrounded her, she was able to use the time-honored institution of reading aloud to children to make a crack in that wall. She could still select books to read at story time and discuss them with the children. The topics of these books could be revisited through writing and art. As the year went on, Kim and her children began to question the assumptions that drove what went on in their classroom, their school, and their community. Without causing much of a stir, critical literacy began to seep into the culture of their classroom. Three underlying theories in Kim's story can help to explain how and why this happened.

Theory 1: Teachers don't have to work alone.

Much has been written about the benefits of teacher study groups (Birchak, et al., 1998; Lewison, 1995; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). These authors offer wonderful examples of teacher study groups at work and provide evidence for the claim that professional development should not attend to the goal of "filling teachers' heads with new and innovative ideas that may come and go" but should instead "aim to enhance teachers'

BLE 4.1

delines for Identifying Critical Books

several occasions during the past few years, we have worked with a idy group of our colleagues to explore new books that address social issues and to articulate guidelines for identifying books that can easily be used to begin critical conversations. In two instances, these efforts led to chapters focusing on critical literacy that were subsequently published in *Adventuring with Books* (Harste, et al., 2000; Leland, et al., 2002). These chapters provide annotations for many picture books and chapter books that our study group judged as meeting at least one of the following criteria.

(1) They do not make difference invisible but rather explore how differences can actually make a difference. In this case, the differences noted might relate to culture, language, history, class, gender, race, age, or disability.

(2) They enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced of marginalized. We call them the *indignant ones.*

(3) They show how people can begin to take action on important social issues.

(4) They explore dominant systems of meaning that operate in our society to position individuals and groups.

(5) They help us to question why certain groups are positioned as others.

Of course we did not always agree on whether a book met one of these criteria and our differences of opinion came out in a number of heated discussions. But as usual, tension served to drive the learning process, and though we never reached consensus on some issues, we did develop a deeper understanding of the multiple perspectives that were at play.

Source: From J. Harste, A. Breau, C. Leland, M. Lewison, A Ociepka & V. Vasquez. Critical literacy. In K.M. Pierce (Ed.), *Adventuring with Books* (12th ed.). Copyright 2000 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

Invitation for Disruption 1:

Investigate Students' Conversations About Books

- Make a list of the social issues you hear your students discussing. This might include topics like divorce, disability, gangs, homophobia, and poverty.
- Choose one topic, and pull together a text set of at least three books that address it. Choose at least one book that is a risky text for you.
- Read the books aloud, and help students to identify common themes as well as differences that are reflected in the books.
- What surprised, bothered, or pleased you about the students' conversations that followed after reading this text set? How did students respond to the risky text?

intellectual activity" (Nieto, 2003, p. 18). Participation in an inquiry or study group entails a lot of intellectual activity. Researchers have also discussed the power of collaboration more generally without using the *study group* or *inquiry group* designation. Sach (2003, p. 117) talks about collaborative action "as a strategy to interrupt and 'take stock' of what is happening in schools and classrooms." In a meta-analysis of studies on professional development, Borko (2004, p. 6) concludes, "strong professional communities can foster teacher learning."

In Kim's case, joining a teacher study group gave her access to both materials and a community of fellow teachers who shared many of her interests. The books they discussed at study group meetings (Table 4.1) gave her a place to begin her own investigation. She simply started reading some of these books aloud at story time and encouraged her students to talk about what was going on in them. Since all of the books focused on complex social issues, the children were almost always anxious to participate in discussions, and she never had to work very hard to keep

Invitation for Disruption 2:

Learning What Happens When Students Linger in Text

- Read aloud a single picture book about a tough social issue three times. Jot down field notes after each reading.
- After the first reading, encourage the students to make personal connections to the text.
- After the second reading, invite students to ask questions about the text.
- After the third reading, have the class discuss how this text connects to larger issues in the community or culture.
- Review your field notes. What insights did you gain about your students during each of the readings?

the conversation going. She also noted that the topics of the books kept coming up again and again. In addition to the books provided by the study group, Kim also had the benefit of collaborating with colleagues who were engaged in similar investigations. When she reported back on new strategies she tried, the study group audience always gave her helpful and supportive feedback. Colleagues who had more experience with critical literacy provided models from their own classrooms while acknowledging the impressive progress Kim was making in hers. When something did not go well, other teachers offered suggestions for what to try the next time.

Theory 2: Lingering in text is important.

In *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters*, Sumara (2002, p. 19) offers numerous examples that show how discussing, rereading, and annotating a common text "generates surprising and purposeful insights." Sumara defines a common text as one that has been read and revisited by two or more people. In this sense, any text read aloud and discussed with a child or group of children is a common text for the reader and all of the listeners. But reading (or hearing) a story is not enough. It also takes some lingering in the text to get to the kinds of insights Sumara discovered. This lingering can occur in discussion forums that provide opportunities for individuals to offer (and hear) different perspectives. Each contribution helps to expand other participants' understandings while also offering new questions to ponder.

Lingering also takes place when we reread texts, write about them, and transmediate (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) what they mean to us. The process of transmediation challenges a reader (or listener) to articulate the underlying meaning of a story and present it through an alternate sign system. For example, Kim knew that her students were surprised and angry to see pictures of the Japanese internment camps in *So Far from the Sea*, so she invited them to linger in the text and to respond to it through art and writing. The end result of this activity was that it helped the children to identify and unpack aspects of the story that were hard for them to understand and accept. Drawing pictures of the barbed wire and writing captions like, "It was not fair that they locked some people up" gave them a chance to share their opinion about this chapter in American history with others. This was not the only instance where lingering in text proved to be helpful. As part of her work with the critical literacy study group, Kim read many books that front-loaded various difficult social issues like poverty, racism, or war. But she did not just read the books and then drop the subject. She made time for the children to talk about them, write about them, act them out, and draw pictures of what they meant.

Lingering in text is important because it gives us a chance to see things differently. Some books that we have never looked at critically

might turn out to have more issues than we expected. For example, many of us recognize "Once there was a tree and she loved a little boy" as the first line from *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964). Our teacher education students smile indulgently and say, "Oh, I love that book," when we read it to them. Seen through a noncritical lens, it is a cute story that they have heard many times. However, when we follow immediately by reading *Piggybook* (Browne, 1986), the conversations get more intense. *Piggybook* tells the story of a mother who got so sick of waiting on her husband and sons that she walked out on them and did not come home until they agreed to share the work. Almost immediately, we hear our students—who are mostly women—saying things like, "Oh! I never noticed that the tree was a she. And now I see that this is like the story of my life—give, give, give. There's nothing left of me once everyone else in the family is satisfied! I never saw that in *The Giving Tree* before." After a few comments like this, the men—always an underrepresented group—begin to feel victimized. Usually one of them will say that *Piggybook* is unfair because it makes men look bad and "some of us really do help out around the house." Often there is someone in the group who reacts negatively to *Piggybook* for yet another reason and argues that a mother should never walk out on her family. Someone else will immediately ask why it is any worse for a mother to do that than a father. Statements like, "Maybe there's a double standard going on here that we need to talk about" keep the conversation going and invite more people to get involved in it. There is often a great deal of tension that accompanies these conversations, and sometimes people get involved because they vehemently disagree with either the book or someone's response to the book. This brings us to the last theory we want to address.

Invitation for Disruption 3:

Transmediation

- *Read aloud a single picture book about a tough social issue three times. Jot down field notes after each reading.*
- *After each reading, invite students to respond to the story through the use of a different sign system—for example, drama, art, music, or mathematics.*
- *Share transmediations with the whole group, and discuss how the meaning potential of the story was expanded or constrained through this process.*
- *Review your field notes. What new understandings about learning through transmediation were developed?*

Theory 3: Tension drives the learning process.

The common-sense notion of tension is negative in our consensus-driven culture. It is often seen as something to be avoided at any cost. To us, tension is a plus that goes hand in hand with diversity and difference and opens up spaces for more voices to be heard. There is never a shortage of tension in our teacher education classes when we read picture books like *Sister Anne's Hands* (Lorbiecki, 1998), *White Socks Only* (Coleman, 1996), and *Freedom Summer* (Wiles, 2001). These stories recount ugly racist incidents that stop all of us in our tracks. When we read these books to children, as Kim did, they are often puzzled as to why some people would be so mean. They see this treatment as not fair and conclude that these things should not happen. But with adults we often get complaints that the books are unfair because they make White people look bad. This reaction is almost always followed by someone on the other side of the issue asking if blaming the victim is really very productive, and the conversation continues. We suspect that this is the first time many of our adult students have ever been asked to think about—or talk about—

TABLE 4.2
How Critical Literacy was Enacted in Kim's Classroom

Resources	Critical Practices Enacted	How the Teacher Took Up a Critical Stance
Books about homelessness: The Lady in the Box (McGovern, 1997); Fly Away Home (Bunting, 1991)	Discussed how people are positioned by homelessness and the resulting stereotype	Consciously chose an alternate way to enact storytime to focus on a difficult social issue
Teacher study group	Worked collaboratively with others to change practice and take social action	Took a risk to inquire into the use of social issues texts
Books about racism: Sister Anne's Hands (Lorbiecki, 1998); Freedom Summer (Wiles, 2001); White Socks Only (Coleman, 1996)	Interrogated multiple perspectives by telling the stories of different people who experience discrimination	Developed new instructional approaches as a result of being cognizant of options in interpretation, response, and action
School food drive	Problematized a commonplace practice (i.e., food drive) to show another perspective	Moved children from personal experiences to larger social issues
Class discussions about controversial topics like homelessness and why some Japanese people were put into internment camps	Asked difficult new questions about why these things (i.e., homelessness, internment camps) happened in the first place	Focused on issues of power and equity with young children

racism. Not everyone is thrilled with the experience. Having one's mind opened can be a painful experience, but we do not see that as a reason to let our future teachers—or anyone else, for that matter—off the hook.

How Was Critical Literacy Enacted in Kim's Classroom?

Table 4.2 summarizes how a critical literacy instructional model was enacted in Kim's first-grade classroom. In addition, we can map how Kim moved between the personal and the social with her interest in learning more about critical literacy (Figure 4.1). The flowchart shows how Kim began with a personal inquiry and then invited her children

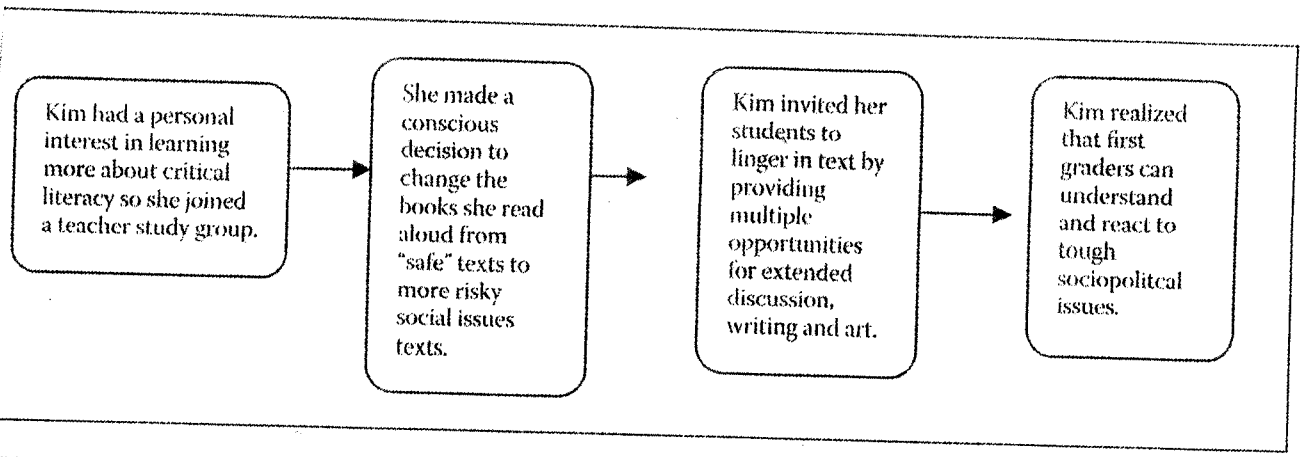

FIGURE 4.1
How Kate moved curriculum between the personal and the social.

to become coresearchers with her. Taking the initial risk to feature a different kind of book at story time allowed her to open up new topics of conversation. In addition, she began using some of the instructional strategies that were shared by teachers in her study group. These strategies provided opportunities for children to linger in text and to respond to the social issues books through a variety of sign systems. The more Kim incorporated different social issues into her reading and writing curriculum, the more interest her students displayed in investigating these issues further. Her initial hesitancy to use risky texts gradually turned into enthusiasm as she saw how engaging they were for her students. In the thought piece that follows, Jerry Harste debunks some reasons for avoiding these books and challenges us to come face to face with our position on censorship.

Lingering Questions

- At the present time, critical literacy exists outside of the officially sanctioned school literacy curriculum. How can teachers and university researchers start to get things turned around so that it becomes an essential part of the curriculum rather than an optional add-on?
- Are any issues too controversial to discuss with children? How should we respond to censorship? There is an increasing set of books that focuses on issues related to individuals and groups who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning (GLBTQ). This set includes both picture books and adolescent fiction (Table 4.3). Some parents have registered concerns about books that address homosexual themes. What can be done to invite parent input without diminishing teachers' ability to address topics that many of their students are already facing?

TABLE 4.3
Books That Address GLBTQ Topics

Daddy's Roommate (Willhoite, 1990)

[a]*From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Woodson, 1995)

[a]*Ironman* (Crutcher, 2004).

Max (Isadora, 1984)

Molly's Family (Garden, 2004)

Oliver Button is a Sissy (De Paola, 1979

Heather Has Two Mommies (Newman, 2000)

Holly's Secret (Garden, 2000)

[a]*Split Image* (Glenn, 2002)

[a]*The Brimstone Journals* (Koertge, 2001)

The Sissy Ducking (Fierstein, 2002)

[a] Books for adolescent or young adult readers.

Thought Piece

Risky Texts

Jerome C. Harste

Teacher Comments:

- Jules Lester's *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (1998): "This book is not age appropriate for the children I teach."
- Virginia Walker's *Making Up Megaboy* (1998): "I don't think the children I teach would understand this book. It's way beyond their instructional level."
- Peter Hautman's *Godless* (2003): "If I think a book is controversial, I don't use it. Who needs it? I have found contemporary novels, too often, deal with drugs, premarital sex, alcoholism, divorce, school shootings, high school gangs, school dropouts, racism, violence, and sensuality. Any one of these topics would get the parents in my district up in arms."
- Ntozaki Shange's *White Wash* (1997): "I think this book makes White people look bad."

As is evident from these oral and written comments by teachers, there are lots of ways to censor books. Teachers are particularly good at it. Oh, they do not call it censorship. They call it selecting, but it is censorship nevertheless, plain and simple. In "selecting" books for reading, teachers will tell you they consider the contribution that the work will make to the topic under study, its

aesthetic value, its honesty, its readability, and its appeal to the children they teach. "All that sounds fine," you might say. "It's what professionals should do."

And, to some extent I agree. But when the net result is safe texts that are not worth talking about, I have to take issue. In fact, I would argue that most of the reasons you may be thinking of not using a particular text in your classroom should be reconsidered. Your reasons are probably the very reasons you should not only be using it, but using it with a vengeance!

First things first: It is the right of every individual not just to read but to read whatever he or she wants to read. This is absolutely basic to a democratic society. Second, this right is based on an assumption that educated people can be trusted to make their own decisions because they understand consequences, can make judgments, and are knowledgeable and informed. Third, the first and second reasons are not only what schooling is all about but why we absolutely need to use risky texts if we really do our jobs. It is also why banning particular books in our classrooms is a very bad idea even when we think we have some pretty good reasons.

It is bad enough that we have narrow-minded, anti-intellectual, ultramoral, and ultrapolitical groups against freedom of speech and of the press. I argue that we should not inadvertently join them or support their cause by avoiding risky texts. If we do, we are in effect preparing the children we teach to think like them.

Keep in mind these two facts: (1) When asked, teachers will say they abhor censorship; and (2) more teachers ban more books than any censorship group has ever managed to ban. Said differently, neither of the following reasons holds water:

It's Not at Their Instructional Level

What does this really mean? The book has hard words in it? The book contains too many hard words? Too often, we are taught that if a child reads a page of text and comes to five unknown words on one page, the book is too hard; it is not at that child's instructional level. Teachers who have been taught this belief often teach children to censor books themselves by holding up one figure for every word they cannot read on a page, with the message being that if they get all the fingers on one hand held up, they should choose a different book.

The problem is this might be a topic that the child is really interested in. Would it not be a lot better to say, "I know you might not be able to read every word in this text, but just read as much of it as you can because you are going to love this book."

I knew all of the words in some of the hardest books I have ever read—books like Dewey's (1916) *Democracy and Education*. I am still trying to figure out all of the relationships he saw between democracy and how we educate. And one of the most meaningful books I ever read is one in which I still cannot pronounce all the words: Bakhtin's (1983) *The Dialogic Imagination*.

It is an instructional problem when we try to make reading safe. Most basal reading programs have teachers introduce all of the new words in a story prior to inviting children to read the story. But this is crazy. We have a right to run into a new word every now and then.

We read to learn things. This is what drives the learning process. It is only in schools that we read to practice reading. We call it *reading instruction*, and kids mistake reading instruction for reading. No wonder we create what Huck (1966) calls *aliterate literates*: citizens who know how to read but do not. So censoring books because they have hard words in them is not a good idea.

Nor is readiness. We are never ready for the stuff we learn. If we are ready, we probably already know it and it is not new. I would say the same about scaffolding. I think we overscaffold in the name of good teaching and in the process make learning dull and prosaic. Think of it this way: Risky texts can help us put an edge to learning.

It's too Controversial

Too often we want to play it safe. Few of us got into teaching because we were rabble rousers. We are nice people. We like to talk about nice things. We study things like clowns and magnets, not condoms and race riots.

Former teacher, now novelist, White (1994) tells the story of teaching a particularly hard group of third-grade nonreaders to read. She says she was reading about the sinking of the Titanic at home one night and was struck with the horror of the sinking, the death, the destruction, the ugliness of the affair. She decided to bring the book into class to read the next day. She reports, "Once those children found out that reading could be about things this ugly, this bloody, this brutal, I had no trouble teaching them to read, nor keeping their interest either!"

Teachers often complain to me that they cannot get good literature discussions going in their classrooms. They want to know the secret. The secret is, "Read a book worth talking about." I am not talking about reading politically correct controversial texts. Read some politically incorrect ones. Read some books you know they will never get in Sunday school or at home.

My recommendation is that you put together text sets that represent lots of divergent views. If *war* is the focused study, put together books that question war as well as books that describe our latest military machinery. Do not say goodbye to *Babar* (de Brunhoff, 2000) or decide that there will be no more *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1981) just because these story lines are not in vogue anymore. Juxtapose these texts with texts that send a different message. The tension is what guarantees a grand conversation (Peterson & Eeds, 1999).

Contemporary children's books and adolescent novels talk about life experiences that are relevant to contemporary readers. This is what makes them good and worth reading. They talk about the very issues that students are talking about and need to think through. Better to talk about premarital sex or homosexuality than be faced with a sixth grader who is pregnant or has committed suicide.

Sometimes districts have policies about what topics can and cannot be talked about in school. More frequently, we censor ourselves, thinking we need permission to talk about certain topics like sexuality. It is interesting that many teachers can talk about race but feel they need to send a note home before talking about sexuality. This is most unfortunate since sexuality is a very important topic to people at all ages. Kindergarten children already have notions of what girls can do and what boys can do. There is a lot about sexuality to work through. It is better to be conscious of the decisions we make and their consequence to us and to others than to hold positions unknowingly. It is easy to feel weird or to be positioned as odd. We know a lot about sexuality and are learning more daily. Most parents are probably not going to talk with their kids in an open manner. And if learning about sex back behind the barn worked, we would not be in the mess we are. What better place than in the classroom?

I end this essay with a quote from Justice William O. Douglas of the U.S. Supreme Court (*Adler v. Board of Education*, 1951):

> Where suspicion fills the air and holds scholars in line for fear of their jobs, there can be no exercise of free intellect. . . . A problem can no longer be pursued with impunity to its edges. Fear stalks the classroom. The teacher is no longer a stimulant to adventurous thinking; she becomes instead a pipe line for safe and sound information. A deadening dogma takes the place of free inquiry. Instruction tends to become sterile; pursuit of knowledge is discouraged; discussion often leaves off where it should begin.