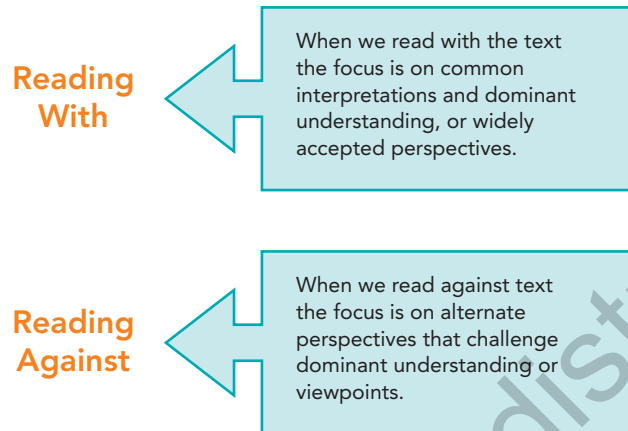


# What Is Critical Comprehension?

1

Critical comprehension entails an active interrogation of words, images, and other presentations of ideas to challenge existing forms of power that privilege some and disadvantage others. When we read critically, we

- question the text, the author's intention, and our own assumptions and biases;
- consider whose perspectives are included or excluded and who benefits from or is harmed by the narrative;
- seek alternate narratives and counternarratives to develop a deeper, broader, and more informed understanding that leads to heightened awareness of inequity and positions us to take action in pursuit of social justice;
- acknowledge that all texts are constructed by a person, or group, with their own biases and intentions;
- recognize that the effects of texts on readers are shaped by a reader's identities, background knowledge, and the perspectives they bring to the text; and
- engage in reading with the text and reading against the text. We must first read with the text to better understand what it is we are reading against (see Figure 1.1).

**FIGURE 1.1** Reading With  and Reading Against Text 

*Source:* Harste, J. C., Vasquez, V., Alberts, P. (2021). *Using Art Critically: Volume 2*. Bloomington, IN: CCCPress.

To become critically literate is to develop the ability to examine

- whose stories are told and whose are omitted;
- whose voices are represented and whose are ignored;
- what topics or issues (e.g., racism, sexism, ableism) are avoided or misrepresented;
- how structures position some in power while marginalizing others; and
- ways to disrupt systems of inequities.

Critical readers and consumers

- question and problematize text;
- examine what the text says, how it is said, who created it, and why it was created; and
- examine what texts omit, and who benefits from such omissions.

Questioning text helps readers reveal power relations and inequities also mirrored in society (Jones, 2006; Vasquez, 2010). Critical readers bring this work beyond the pages of the text and apply it to the way they live their lives: always seeking the full truth and questioning factors that may impede the whole truth from being revealed. Critical readers avoid being manipulated by the dominant perspective as they confront stereotypes and bias (Boutte, 2008) and work toward greater equity and justice.

Critical comprehension, then, is an approach to deeper reading that moves beyond the passive acceptance of text and literal levels of meaning to question the word and the world (Freire, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 1987; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004a, 2004b). And as we read critically, we recognize that meaning resides neither in the text nor in the reader. Instead, meaning is created by the interactions with the text as filtered through a reader's identities, background knowledge, and the perspectives they bring to their reading of a text (Rosenblatt, 1995). There are multiple ways of responding to or generating meaning from a text.

Rather than looking for the correct meaning of a text, critical readers

- read *with* and *against* the text (Janks, 2010);
- recognize that people who produce texts make choices that are not always in everyone's best interest;
- understand that texts have different social effects; and
- read from multiple perspectives to make more informed decisions about what information to take away, what information to question, and what information to leave behind (Janks, 2014).

Meaning is created by the interactions with the text as filtered through a reader's identities, background knowledge, and the perspectives they bring to their reading of a text (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Luke and Freebody's (1997) Four Resources Model of reading as social practice suggests the need for readers to be code breakers, meaning makers, text users, and *text critics*. Their model was based on an examination of existing and proposed literacy curricula and pedagogical strategies across numerous classroom settings (see Figure 1.2). One of their findings was that supporting children as text critics is an area that was addressed minimally if at all in classrooms.

It is as text critics that we dig beneath the surface level of literal understanding to excavate issues of power and privilege and begin to question our assumptions and expand our perspectives. Acknowledging that both reading and writing are never neutral and are shaped by our ideologies and beliefs, critical comprehension works to help us interrogate and unpack our own assumptions and the messages conveyed in texts (Luke & Freebody, 1999; Vasquez, 2010). As readers deconstruct text, they examine the relationships of power, privilege, and position in text.

Critical readers also reconstruct text to represent multiple perspectives and truths. This approach not only positions the reader to dig deeper beneath the surface level of the text, but also considers the information from other perspectives as they imagine and seek out counternarratives in search of a more complete truth.

**FIGURE 1.2 Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model**

<p><b>Code-Breaking Practices</b></p> <p>Skills required to break the code of written texts such as, spelling, alphabet sounds in words, structural conventions and patterns</p>	<p><b>Meaning Making Practices</b></p> <p>Opportunities to participate with text—including understanding and composing meaningful written, visual, and spoken texts—in relation to a reader's available knowledge and experiences</p>
<p><b>Text User Practices</b></p> <p>Using texts functionally by knowing about and acting on different cultural and social functions that various texts perform and understanding that these functions shape the way texts are structured, such as their tone or degree of formality</p>	<p><b>Text Critic Practices</b></p> <p>Practices that include critical analysis of text and the transformation of texts based on the understanding that texts are not natural or neutral and that they represent particular points of views that can silence some people, privilege others, and influence individuals and groups</p>

In the Four Resources Model, each set of practices described above 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.

## The Word "Critical"

The word "critical" applies to various ways of thinking:

**Critical Thinking**—A focus on deeper, analytical thinking (e.g., asking complex questions).

**Critical Race Theory**—The term was initially applied to legal studies in the 1970s (Bell, 1976). It is a cross-disciplinary way to examine and make sense of ongoing and systemic disparate outcomes (e.g., in real estate or educational opportunity) based on race (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Bell, 2018; Crenshaw, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Love, 2021).

**Critical Literacy**—A way of thinking and being that is focused on both text consumption and text production as well as the relationship between the two (Janks, 1993, 2012; O'Brien, 2001; Vasquez, 1994; Vasquez et al., 2019).

**Critical Comprehension**—A framework for engaging with texts using a critical literacy lens. This is a term that we have coined to extend critical literacy and its application in elementary classrooms.

The following chart delineates what we mean and what we don't mean regarding critical literacy.

CRITICAL LITERACY IS . . .	CRITICAL LITERACY IS NOT . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centered on student issues and concerns</li> <li>• Responsive</li> <li>• A lens/framework for teaching, learning, and living</li> <li>• Embedded in our everyday teaching</li> <li>• Contextualized</li> <li>• Participatory justice-seeking learning</li> <li>• Fluid and evolving</li> <li>• Grounded in our own practice</li> <li>• Consciousness of power, privilege, and intention</li> <li>• A way to engage and empower active citizens</li> <li>• Liberating and transformative</li> <li>• A way of reading the word and the world (Freire &amp; Macedo, 1987)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher-centered</li> <li>• An add-on</li> <li>• Isolated lessons taught out of context</li> <li>• One-size-fits-all curriculum</li> <li>• Linear and step-by-step</li> <li>• Finding the “right” answers to someone else’s questions</li> <li>• Taking a single source as the whole truth</li> <li>• Accepting what is said or written without question</li> <li>• Indoctrination of beliefs or ideas</li> </ul>

Central to critical comprehension instruction is a focus on students' interests, passions, and ideas as they engage with texts featuring critical dialogue and examination of both knowledge and the gatekeepers of that knowledge. This stance is in direct opposition to what Freire (2000) refers to as the “banking method” where teachers act as a dispenser of knowledge.

Critical comprehension is not a scripted program, and it does not follow a step-by-step sequence. Therefore, the focus of lessons will vary because it should be responsive to students' needs, interests, curiosities, and concerns. It also varies based on the context in which texts are being used to offer perspective for teaching and learning (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Comber et al., 2001; Vasquez, 2014).

Criticality calls for teachers to connect their teaching to the human condition and to frame their teaching practices in response to the “social and uneven times in which we live” (Muhammad, 2020). As teachers,

Central to critical comprehension instruction is a focus on students' interests, passions, and ideas as they engage with texts featuring critical dialogue and examination of both knowledge and the gatekeepers of that knowledge.

we aim to prepare children to be successful in school-based literacy practices and to use literacy as a tool to become engaged and empowered citizens. When children learn to read with a critical stance, they begin to identify and examine problems, become more socially conscious, and work for social action to make a difference in their lives, the community, and the larger world around them (Vasquez, 2010, 2017).

### A Framework for Critical Comprehension

In each chapter that follows you will find a collection of lessons with intentionally selected text to help readers of all ages engage with texts for critical comprehension.

We recommend asking the following questions when selecting texts. If you find these questions challenging, we recommend doing this work with a friend or colleague as a way to begin the process of critically analyzing texts.

- How does the book reflect students' identities and cultures?
- How does the book move beyond a "single story" and a "single truth"?
- Have the books received culturally specific awards (e.g., Coretta Scott King, Stonewall, Pura Belpré, etc.)?
- Is the text authentic and accurate?
- Does the text include harmful stereotypes?
- Does the book offer multiple perspectives?
- What other texts could provide alternate perspectives?
- Could the text cause harm? If so, for whom?
- What other texts can be layered to deepen understanding?

#### Reliable Sources for Book Recommendations

Social Justice Books: A Teaching for Change Project  
[www.socialjusticebooks.org](http://www.socialjusticebooks.org)

American Indians in Children's Literature by Debbie Reese  
<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>

Learning for Justice  
<https://bit.ly/3vFdcA2>

Equity Through Education Collaborative

<https://bit.ly/3d7XzL5>

Our Story: Exploring Diversity

<http://ourstory.diversebooks.org/pro/1.05/>

International Latino Book Awards

<https://www.latinobookawards.org/>

Rethinking Schools

<https://rethinkingschools.org>

Coretta Scott King Book Awards

[bit.ly/3UISnTC](http://bit.ly/3UISnTC)

Stonewall Book Awards List

[bit.ly/3OXnLXB](http://bit.ly/3OXnLXB)

The lessons throughout this book are possibilities of what you may design for your own classroom practice. They are not intended to be scripted lessons or sequential in nature as we believe this work should ultimately emerge from the interests, concerns, curiosities, and questions posed by students. Each lesson features an intentionally selected text to be read aloud by the teacher and revisited for follow-up reads for deeper examination or excavation of a topic, idea, or issue.

Each lesson makes use of a framework that we have developed for supporting critical comprehension. The framework includes multiple reads of a text. The elements of the framework are described below and summarized in Figure 1.3.



### First Read: Movie Read

This first visit, the “movie read” (Laminack, 2019), focuses on taking in the story without interruption. In a movie theater, no one hits pause or stops to share their thoughts. Instead, the movie keeps going, and we keep watching and listening and making meaning individually. When the movie is over, we likely chat about our connections, confusions, interpretations, and questions. Our discussions often spark thoughts we hadn’t considered and may raise new questions, confusion, or understanding. And that may result in viewing the movie again. If you return

to the movie, you bring a new frame of reference, an understanding of the whole that enables you to tune in more closely and examine bits with new insight.

This first reading of the text is intended to be much like that first viewing of the movie and may be a full uninterrupted reading or a picture walk if the art is sufficient to provide a gestalt for the book, an overview of the whole. This experience offers insight into how the text is organized and the perspective from which it is told, and it provides a contextual frame in terms of time and place. It leaves students with budding knowledge of the issue(s), problem(s), or conflict(s). This positions you to revisit the text guided by their questions, knowing where they want to pause and examine more closely, and which ideas they want to challenge and excavate.

### Read-Aloud Tip

When reading aloud, take the time to rehearse the book so that you have a feel for the pacing of the text and know the spots where you will shift your voice to reflect the tone and evoke the mood.

Before beginning the read aloud or picture walk, make sure the students are comfortably gathered near the book so they can clearly see the illustrations. Remember that some children may prefer to sit and listen while others need to sketch or jot ideas as they listen. Allow those who like to think with pencils or crayons to bring their tools with them.



### Second Read: Reading With the Text

The second read focuses on the common interpretations and dominant understanding, or widely accepted perspectives (Figure 1.1). When reading with the text, consider engaging with the text in one or more of the following ways:

- Summarize the text.
- Say something about the text:
  - Share a comment.
  - Make a connection.
  - Pose a question.



- Comment on a decision, change, action or reaction, or a wondering.
- Share a quote or phrase that resonates or makes you think about something differently.
- Do a quick write in response to a segment of the text.
- Make a quick sketch to visualize.
- Create a bumper sticker or theme statement for the text.

Reading with the text reveals students' current understanding and the skills or tools they use for engaging with text, along with what is on their minds. This can offer a starting point for framing the return read to read critically.



### Return Read: Reading Critically

*Return read* is a term we use to describe revisiting a text after the second read with a specific focus to question the text, examine whose voices or experiences are centered or decentered, or challenge the status quo. Through reading critically, we hope to create a space for students to “name and critique injustices to help them ultimately develop the agency to build a better world” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 12). In other words, during the return read, teachers and students are reading against the text, asking and answering questions about the word and the world.

When reading critically, consider engaging with the text in one or more of the following ways:

- Focus on alternate perspectives that challenge dominant understanding or beliefs.
- Read against the text by questioning the text, the author's intent, and our own stances as a reader.
- Explore how the text centers certain groups and ideas while marginalizing others.
- Consider how our identities influence the perspectives we bring to the text and how that shapes our understanding.
- Deconstruct the text to examine whose perspectives are included and whose are omitted and how that shapes our thinking.
- Consider how the historical perspective, the social and political climate of the setting, and the publication date may influence our thinking.

### Return Read: Reading Critically Tip

As you read against the text, consider how your ideas and observations shift or change and whether you are encouraged to act on your new understanding. Are you eager to learn more? Are there gaps that need to be examined and shared? If so, where are they, and with whom should they be shared? How can you use the knowledge gained from exploring alternate perspectives to create a more complete narrative? Can you right any injustices? If so, how? What steps will you take to advocate for change and greater equality and justice?

Figures 1.3 through 1.5 provide questions to consider when reading for critical comprehension to support your work as you and your students read against the text.

You may need to scaffold, adapt, or rephrase some of these questions for your students.

**FIGURE 1.3** Text Factors

#### Questions to Consider When Reading for Critical Comprehension

- How is the text organized in a way that highlights certain ideas and values over other ideas and values?
- How does the text work to highlight certain individuals or groups or make them seem more important?
- How does the text work to make certain individuals or groups less visible or make them seem unimportant?
- Who is the author? Does the author have credibility? Can they be trusted? Why or why not?
- How would the text be different if written by someone else? Who?
- How might the text help me challenge my perceptions and assumptions or my thoughts and ideas about a certain topic or issue?
- Does the text help me to think of a topic or issue in a different way?
- How is the text attempting to influence my thinking about this topic?
- How does the text perpetuate or disrupt stereotypes?
- Is the text accessible or understandable for all readers? If not, who would be able to easily make sense of the text? Who would find it hard to make sense of the text?
- How are words or images used to make the text easy or hard to understand?
- Who is missing and not represented or visible in the text? What purpose does it serve to exclude certain individuals or groups in a text?

**FIGURE 1.4 Unpacking the Text****Questions to Consider When Reading for Critical Comprehension**

- Whose perspective is included?
- Are there perspectives that were not included?
- Whose voice is heard?
- Whose voice is not heard?
- How do the different perspectives advantage some individuals and groups?
- How do the different perspectives disadvantage some individuals and groups?
- Whose story/voice is missing or misrepresented?
- What issues are being explored in the text?
- How/why do the issues being explored in the text present a problem or difficulty?
- How does the setting influence the story and the view or perspective I am offered?
- How do past causes that led to the event or idea in the story influence the view I am given?
- How does the social and political climate of the time period, or what is going on in the world and in my community, influence the view I am given?
- How can I use information from reading and talking about the text to inspire me to take action?
- What more can I read or research to give me other perspectives to consider?

online  
resources

**FIGURE 1.5 Reader Factors****Questions to Consider When Reading for Critical Comprehension**

- How does the text position me as a reader?
  - How does it make me feel as an individual?
  - Do I find it easy to make sense of the text or do I find it hard to make sense of the text?
  - Do my past experiences help me to make sense of the text?
  - What kinds of experiences would help me to make sense of the text?
- From what perspective am I reading the text?
- What experiences come to mind when I read the text?
- When assumptions do I make, or what understanding do I come away with based on reading the text?
- How does my position influence these assumptions?

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resources

## Reading for Action

At the end of each chapter, we include a Reading for Action section to help bring together the big ideas from across the collection of lessons and make space for taking action. At this point you have read *with the text*, and you have read critically *against the text*. You and your students have done the work of reading critically to question the text and examine ways in which the text positions some in power while marginalizing others; you have engaged in robust conversations, further reading, and research to excavate more complete truths. Now is the time to ask, “So what? Now that we have done this work, how are we different and how do we use what we learned to outgrow our current selves?”

Invite students to reflect on the actions that seem most appropriate for them regarding the issue or topic under exploration. For example, students may make a commitment to conscious language use or a change of attitude or behavior. They may decide to create a public service announcement, reconstruct the text to provide an alternate version to share a more complete truth, design posters for the school or community, or launch a campaign to rally support for a particular cause (Laminack & Kelly, 2019). Remain open to what students feel inspired to do and help facilitate their decisions and actions.

### Reading for Action

Reading for action may occur after reading one text or a collection of texts from a given chapter. If a particular text inspires children to act, follow their lead. Invite them to consider what an alternative text or counternarrative might offer. Ultimately, we aim to help children consider how to become agents of, rather than victims of, text.

## Creating a Space for Critical Comprehension

### The First Days of School

Although our intent in this section is to offer insight into ways of creating a classroom community as part of laying the groundwork for critical comprehension, we believe that fostering a classroom community is something that should happen as a prelude to learning together. One way to do this is by sending each child a handwritten letter or an

email with information about yourself, including photos, and what you most look forward to in the coming year together. To learn more about the students, provide them with a self-addressed stamped envelope for their response or ask them to record a video. Invite them to share about themselves, their interests, and what they most look forward to.

### Communicating With Families

Invite the parents/caregivers to share information about their child and their family's culture and lifestyle. By honoring students' and their families' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), we position their ways of being and knowing as valid and valuable. Powerful information about children and their families can help develop a culturally responsive curriculum, select culturally relevant resources, and build positive social identities for each child (Hass, 2020). To learn more about the children and their families, invite parents/caregivers to complete a survey (print or digital) at the beginning of the year and when new students join the class. Sample questions may include "What languages are spoken in your house?," "What are your memories of learning as a child?," and "What are your fears or concerns about your child this year in school, if any?" (Kleinrock, 2021).

### Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally relevant and responsive teaching is an asset-based approach to empower students as capable learners by bridging their cultural learning styles and tools in the classroom (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

### Morning Meeting

Once school begins, we recommend starting each day with a morning meeting. In this meeting, everyone gathers in a comfortable spot where they can see each other. Begin the first meeting by naming it as a morning meeting and explaining that this is a routine that will occur daily. Explain that the purpose of the meeting is to come together in community to share what is on our minds and in our hearts and the many connections we will make to the learning happening throughout the day both in and out of the classroom. For the first meeting, we recommend getting to know each other.

The morning meeting is the bedrock for establishing a classroom community where children can feel comfortable being themselves. This includes being brave to be uncomfortable, to take risks, and to participate in critical conversations to grow as learners and human beings. Students need safe spaces where they can be vulnerable to speak their minds, share their truths, ask their questions, and push boundaries to disrupt, consider, and offer various perspectives. Trust must be established and maintained for children to be brave to participate in courageous conversations and foster critical comprehension.

### Co-Constructing Agreements

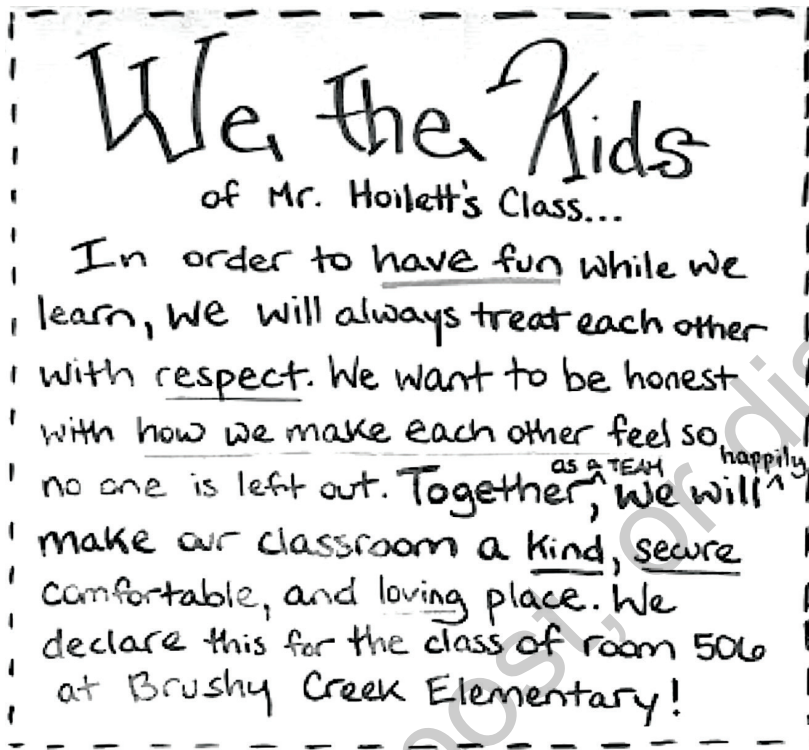
After you have spent some time getting to know each other in morning meetings, have a conversation with students to co-construct a class agreement.

- **Tell students:** *We will have a lot of conversations this year and there will be times when some of us will have different opinions and ideas. No matter what each of us believes, we must listen and respond to each other respectfully. So, we need guidelines to help us know what to do when we disagree or when we have hard conversations. To help us do so, we will create a class agreement together.*

These agreements help establish a sense of belonging and shared ownership in the class community where students can participate without fear of judgment. When conversations explore sensitive topics, remind students of class agreement statements, such as “speak honestly about our experiences and feelings,” “use I statements,” or “listen with compassion,” previously established and agreed on by all stakeholders.

The co-constructed classroom agreements can facilitate respectful conversations to provide opportunities for critical thinking and expand students’ perspectives beyond their own experiences. A space created in this way gives students a voice, empowers them with confidence, and provides them the agency to make their own decisions. It also actively prepares students to become engaged citizens by embracing and practicing democratic values, active listening, communicating with others, working together to reach a compromise, and learning how to disagree or share an unpopular perspective while respecting others’ views—all important skills for critical comprehension and life. “We the Kids” (Figure 1.6) is an example of a class agreement.

FIGURE 1.6 We the Kids



### Individual and Class Affirmations

With a class agreement established, another way to build the foundation for critical comprehension work includes the use of individual and class affirmations. Affirmations are words or phrases to remind ourselves of key principles and values that matter to us individually and as a collective community.

Students in Alyssa (Cameron) Likens's fifth-grade class begin each day by reciting a co-constructed class pledge comprised of agreed-on affirmations (Figure 1.7).

The process for co-constructing this class pledge began with a read aloud of Grace Byers's *I Am Enough* (Figure 1.8).

After reading, students created individual affirmations to highlight what makes them who they are and finished each statement with "I Am Enough." Then the students placed the affirmations where they could see them as a daily reminder (Figure 1.9). After students created individual

**FIGURE 1.7** Class Pledge

## Morning Mindset Matters

I am enough.

I will look for and find the good things today.

I CAN and WILL do hard things. I won't say can't!

I can do anything I put my mind to.

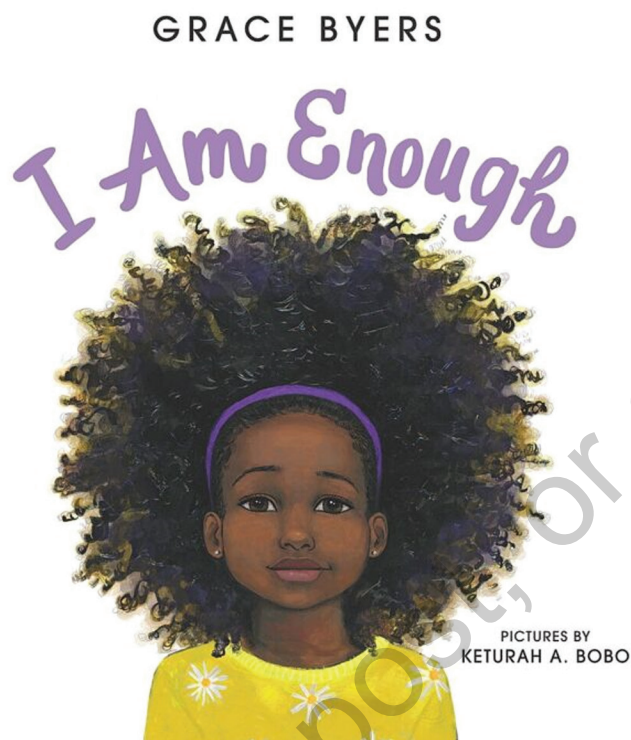
I will be proud of who I am because I matter.

affirmations, they brainstormed classroom affirmations as a group. Then they narrowed the big list down to five agreed-on statements for the class pledge. Each morning, a student leads the class in repeating them together.

### Trusting Ourselves and Each Other

Our stories matter and we must make space for students to share their own stories. Knowing who we are and who we share space with is essential to building the trust necessary to engage in courageous and critical conversations. Feltman (2009) defines trust as choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions. According to Brown (podcast on trust, November 2021), trust is built on the everyday small moments and interactions with others. She tells the story of how her daughter was heartbroken and in tears one day after coming home from school. She confided in her third-grade peers only to have them turn around and tell the whole class who then laughed at her. Brown uses the analogy of the classroom marble jar to ask her



FIGURE 1.8 *I Am Enough*

*Source:* Byers, G. *I Am Enough*. Balzer & Bray (2018).

daughter which friends contribute marbles and in what ways. Her daughter responds by saying that one friend saves her a seat in the cafeteria, and another acknowledges and greets her grandparents when they attend their soccer game. These seemingly small moments are exactly the kinds of things we can do to build trust. When we offer our stories and listen to others' stories without judgment, we are building trust.

Daniel Hoilett tells his students, "We are bridge builders, but we can't build bridges and make connections if we don't have two ends to start from." Students in Ms. (Cameron) Likens's class brainstorm and share ways they want their peers and teacher to treat them (Figure 1.10).

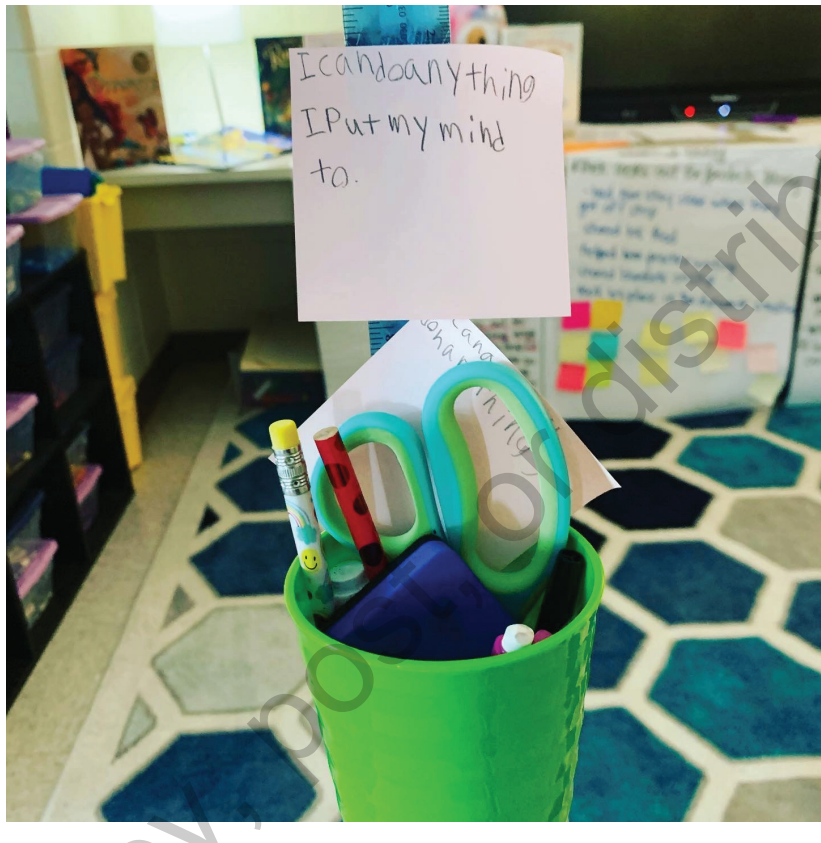
### Books as Mirrors, Windows, Doors, and Curtains

With a class agreement, class pledge, and steps to build trust, we've begun the necessary foundational work to engage in critical conversations. Additionally, we must ensure that all children have

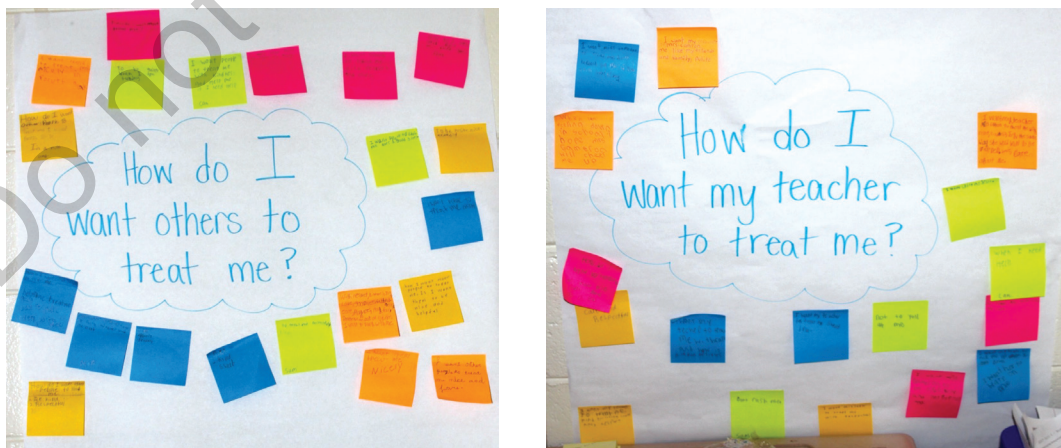


Scan the QR code to watch Courtney Farrell's 2018 TED Talk, when she says, "The shortest distance between two people is a story."

**FIGURE 1.9 Individual Affirmation: "I Can Do Anything I Put My Mind To"**



**FIGURE 1.10 Ms. (Cameron) Likens's Students Build Trust by Sharing How They Want to Be Treated**



opportunities to see themselves reflected in the curriculum in positive and affirming ways. This includes in the pages of the books they read and have read to them, in images posted on walls and on screens, and in the topics being explored in the classroom. Books, for instance, must be *mirrors* (Bishop, 1990) where students can see reflections of themselves. When readers see themselves reflected in the texts they read, they are affirmed and valued (Bishop, 1990; Boyd et al., 2015). This leads to greater engagement in reading as they make connections and interpretations of text (Au, 1980; Christ & Sharma, 2018; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012).

It is also important that children have opportunities for text to serve as *windows* (Bishop, 1990). Literature as a window allows a reader to stand safely in their own identity while exploring a world beyond their current view or demographic and holds the potential to expand their perspectives and understanding of others in the broader society.

Books can also serve as *sliding glass doors* (Bishop, 1990). These books invite the reader to step inside the world unfolding in the book as if they are walking alongside the character.

Dr. Debbie Reese (2019a) has expanded Bishop's metaphor. She writes,

I have been adding a “curtain” to Bishop’s (1990) “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” metaphor when I talk or write about Native stories. This is a way to acknowledge and honor the stories behind the curtain—those that are purposefully kept within Native communities. Native communities resisted historical oppression and continue to preserve our culture by cultivating our ways in private spaces—behind the curtain. While Native people share some of our ways publicly in the present day, there is a great deal that we continue to protect from outsiders. Furthermore, it conveys the importance of [knowing] what belongs within the community and what knowledge can be shared outside of our communities. (pp. 390–391)

The addition of Reese's curtain creates a space for us to better understand what it means to support Native children with the use of children's books about Native American nations that best represent their experiences. The same can be said of books that represent other cultural groups.

For more information on the influential work of Rudine Sims Bishop and Debbie Reese, you can visit these websites:

Bishop's article, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors"  
<https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

Reese's blog, American Indians in Children's Literature  
<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>

### Creating Safe Spaces for Critical Conversations

According to Learning for Justice's *Let's Talk* (Teaching Tolerance, 2019), critical conversations include "any discussions about the ways that injustice affects our lives and our society. It's a conversation that explores the relationship between identity and power, that traces the structures that privilege some at the expense of others, that helps students think through the actions they can take to create a more just, more equitable, world" (p. 2).

To foster safe spaces for all students to participate in critical conversations, Mr. Holett frames his teaching with the Children's Defense Fund Freedom School Partners model for emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual safety (EMPS).

EMPS	FOR TEACHERS	FOR STUDENTS
Emotional safety	How might this book make my students feel?	Can I trust my class with all my feelings?
Mental safety	What mirror or window can I offer to set the stage?	Do I feel comfortable being vulnerable here?
Physical safety	How will I react if conflict arises?	Will I still be okay after I open up to my class?
Spiritual safety	How will I ensure that all hearts and minds are clear?	Am I going to want to share in this way again?

Before doing this work with his students, Mr. Holett does his own work. He considers each question from the teacher's standpoint while planning for read alouds and critical conversations, especially when tackling tough topics. He devotes time during the morning meeting and throughout the

instructional day to ensure that students' hearts and minds are ready to be open and vulnerable to learn together in respectful and collaborative ways.

One day while discussing the impact westward expansion had on Native Americans, one student in Mr. Hoilett's class exclaimed, "Mr. H, please tell me this all is fake!?! No offense to you [pointing to the white students in the room] but this is why I really get frustrated!"

Mr. Hoilett remained calm and paused to ponder how to move the conversation forward. He considered the EMPS questions "How will I react if conflict arises?" and "How will I ensure that all hearts and minds are clear?" He began by referring to the class agreement "We the Kids" (Figure 1.6) and reminded the class that they agreed to create a classroom rooted in respect and love. He then reiterated that although the past is inseparably linked to the present, the white students in his class were not responsible for what occurred in the past, including the impact of westward expansion on Native Americans, and they should not feel a sense of guilt. He explained that although systems of inequality have existed for a long time, we can all work together to end them.

He then reminded the class of an earlier conversation they had about how they wanted to be treated when there is a conflict. "Let's remember that we can't deny our friend's feelings. Can we work toward understanding his perspective and what led to his reaction?" The students' heads nod. Mr. Hoilett then asks the student if he would like to say more about why he was frustrated. The student revealed that he was thinking about the treatment of the Native Americans and how it reminded him of the way the Black community is treated in the United States. He explained how his family regularly discusses current events in the news like the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the killings of unarmed Black men and women. As a Black boy himself, he was highly aware of race relations and racism in his life and in the world around him.

The space created by Mr. Hoilett, for students like this boy to share his reality, is invaluable.

This conversation reveals the relationship between identity and power and how some groups have been and continue to be marginalized. To help students delve deeper into these important conversations, we've developed a series of lessons that you'll find in the chapters that follow.

In this chapter, we defined what we mean by critical comprehension and outlined a framework we developed for use with texts from picture books to print ads and commercials. The elements of the framework were

**FIGURE 1.11** Mr. Holett Reads to His Class

highlighted, and suggestions were offered for using the lessons to create space for critical comprehension in the curriculum.

Chapters 2 through 7 include easy-to-implement lesson series for multiple reads of texts, each focused on different topics:

- Chapter 2, with its focus on identity, is the bedrock for the remaining chapters. We encourage you to do the work alongside your students. To teach critical comprehension, we must first be critically conscious ourselves.
- With the foundation established on identity, Chapter 3 launches an exploration of perspective. This lesson series begins with the exploration of perspective using a wordless picture book to show how more information can be revealed as we widen our lens and then moves to more complex concepts around perspective,

including the role of power in decision making and considering other perspectives.

- Chapter 4 begins with an introduction to the concept of stereotypes and then moves to an exploration of different ways stereotypes shape our thinking and understanding.
- In Chapter 5 we have selected a collection of books to explore bias. Each book creates a space for helping children to learn what it means to read books (the word) and the world from an antibias perspective.
- The lessons in Chapter 6 focus on historically marginalized groups to help students broaden perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and expand their understanding of the past and the present.
- In Chapter 7 we focus on consumerism and make use of picture books and everyday texts like ads and commercials to help students develop an awareness of the intent of product manufacturers and become critical consumers who question and make conscious and informed decisions about their needs and wants.

The lessons were chosen based on feedback from teachers regarding topics they want to address in their classrooms, that they find challenging, or topics for which they would like support. How to work with issues of identity was one such topic so we started there. Identity matters. How we see ourselves and how others see us contribute to shaping what we believe we can and cannot do and influences who we believe we can and cannot be. We believe identity work is a starting point for all the other work. We must examine ourselves, face our biases, and understand the limitations of our perspectives before leading children to do the same.

In the conclusion, we invite you to engage in the process of creating your own unit of study using our critical comprehension framework. To do this we walk you through our process for creating one of the chapters in this book.

We hope you enjoy using the lessons we created for you as much as we enjoyed creating them. We look forward to hearing about the units and lessons that you create for your students.

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