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## Critical Text Selection for the Elementary Classroom: A Case for Strategically Using the Classroom Library to Open New Spaces for Critical Literacy Engagements

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## Critical Text Selection for the Elementary Classroom: A Case for Strategically Using the Classroom Library to Open New Spaces for Critical Literacy Engagements

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### Abstract

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The purpose of this research paper is to encourage school teachers (with an emphasis on elementary teachers) to recognize and explore the literacy potential of their classroom libraries as a powerful critical literacy tool/asset that when designed and utilized strategically has the potential to reposition their classroom pedagogy and curriculum design to be empowering, transformative, inclusive and progressive. To that effect, this paper offers/proposes a framework/model for critical text selection that can be readily adapted by teachers across various grade levels within the K-12 classrooms to identify the specific critical literacy needs of their learners (including the learning environment) and then employ their classroom library as a critical literacy tool that facilitates learner empowerment both inside and outside their learning spaces. The paper also presents interested teachers with an alternate way to traverse the proposed framework in the hope that it will provide an impetus to teacher scholars and educators interested in adapting the framework into their classroom to innovatively modify the framework we have presented to better work with their unique curricular structure and design.

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## Introduction

In the book *Your Classroom Library: New Ways to Give it More Teaching Power*, authors Reutzel and Fawson (2002) compare the classroom library (that is maintained and stocked by the classroom teacher) to be akin to a well-balanced kitchen. In their analogical comparison, they state that a healthy classroom library is expected to provide the learners with staple foods (the core book collection), along with exciting new recipes (books that come and go) while also providing dining in or take-out options since the students can read onsite, check out books, trade them with friends or place book orders (Reutzel & Fawson, 2002, p. 8). When we extend this classroom library-kitchen analogical comparison by conjoining it with the popular phrase you are what you eat (Martin, n.d.), it helps us forefront the essential role that classroom libraries can play towards literacy education. Hence, from a literacy education strategy point-of-view the classroom library can be repositioned to have the potential of becoming an important pedagogy resource for critical literacy offering new ways of thinking and acting to the learners (and the teachers) along with new opportunities to broaden their horizons, enter new worlds, become acquainted with a vast range of ideas and perspectives, and reflect on their own perspectives (Van der Veen, Marjolein, & Bert, 2017, p. 49). According to authors Kleekamp and Zapata (2018), classroom libraries (when meticulously populated to promote critical thinking and inquiry) can serve as invitations to engage in the known, to explore the unfamiliar, to delve into discussions about characters' experiences between the covers of a book, and to grasp for connections in the lives of readers, communities, and the world at large (p. 1). Within that context, in their article *Putting Books in the Classroom Seems Necessary But Not Sufficient*, authors McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi, and Brooks (1999) make an important observation that simply having plenty of books in the classroom is insufficient to produce enhanced educational outcomes (p. 73) hinting at the importance of literacy engagement quality (supplemented with a supportive classroom practice) over simply having at-hand resource quantity. In that vein, according to authors Reutzel and Fawson (2002) the classroom library more often than not ends up being a haphazard collection of donated books, sale books or that earned with class book-order points (p. 8) making the classroom library simply a collection of age-appropriate books (with no real thought put into the role that the books will play within the classroom engagements). Taken together, the classroom library as a strategic resource for critical literacy inquiry/learning is often ignored (ref. (Catapano, Fleming, & Elias, 2009)), unutilized/ underutilized, underestimated, and/or overlooked and so bringing attention to this relatively untapped strategic resource (that is

usually at the ready disposal of the classroom teachers) serves as the primary motivation for the critical text selection criteria to be presented in this paper.

In their book titled *Critical literacy: enhancing students' comprehension of text*, authors DeVoogd and McLaughlin (2004) advise the teachers to especially think –about other aspects of [their] teaching that may contribute to [their] students' motivation" as they –prepare to teach [their] students about critical literacy" (p. 37). This call can be interpreted as a call for *preparation* (as a way to think-ahead or plan-in-advance) and thus an essential call because the most common perception among school teachers is that –the current standards-based, test-driven educational environment would be the major obstacle for enacting critical literacy in their classroom" (Cho, 2015, p. 69). Unfortunately, the classroom library to the teacher is often –a second thought to the establishment of classroom rules and the implementation of curriculum" resulting in –no real connection between the books in the [classroom] library and regular classroom instruction" (Catapano, Fleming, & Elias, 2009, p. 59-60). This approach to teaching also hints at the prevalence of the monologic method to classroom instruction since the teachers seem to be *teaching to the test* (Eranpaloo & Jorgenson, 2018, p. 2). Unfortunately, "a monologically understood world is an objectified world, a world corresponding to a single and unified authorial consciousness" (Hays, 2005, p.9). Dr. Sarah Maxine Greene, in her book titled *Releasing the Imagination*, notes (in regards to this authorial consciousness) that –when nothing intervenes to overcome such inertia, it joins with the sense of repetitiveness and uniformity to discourage active learning" (1995, p. 21). Echoing similar sentiments, authors Van der Veen, Marjolein, & Bert in their article titled *Engaging Children in Dialogic Classroom Talk* state that:

–It requires the effort of teachers to make these classrooms reach their full potential. This is where we (as educators) should decide whether we love the world and our children enough to prepare them to deal with diversity, tensions, and differences; provide them with tools to take advantage of the range of perspectives they encounter; to prepare them to understand the plural other, as well as the plural self (i.e., a multi-voiced self); and to renew a common world that is open and livable" (2017, p. 49-50).

Taken together, it can be understood that the *call* is for classroom reform via strategically using the classroom library so that dialogic meaning-making and sense-making replaces conventional monologic methods and where books in the classroom library are seen/viewed as a *curricular* (and not an extra-curricular) resource that can fuel the dialogues within the classroom that in-turn shall promote critical literacy, critical consciousness and social imagination amongst the participants. This ideological shift is necessary (now more than ever) since the goal of education in this globalizing world is to –create citizens of the world: those with the proclivities and abilities to shift across boundaries—geographically, disciplinarily, professionally, and in engagement with others—with a moral and ethical imperative to engage in and sustain equitable and just relations." (Hawkins, 2014, p. 94). In that context, this call for an ideological shift in classroom pedagogy and curriculum design opens up three very interesting questions for investigation within the elementary education domain, viz.:

RQ1. Why are critical literacy practices important in an elementary classroom?

RQ2. How can the classroom library be utilized as dialogic resource that can promote critical literacy and critical consciousness?

RQ3. What guidelines can an elementary classroom teacher use when building the classroom library?

In the remainder of this paper, we will present our exploration/investigation of these three questions in an effort to offer the readers with a sample criteria/framework that can serve as a reference towards the envisioned classroom library reform.

## **Key Concepts, Innovative Ideas and New Directions: Sources of Inspiration**

### **The Need to Disrupt Structures of Racism in the Elementary Classroom**

–One of the places that racism hides – and one of the best places to oppose it – is books for young people" (Nel, 2017, p.1).

Author Stacey York (2016) shares that –[t]here are many indications that young children are aware of differences and form strong attitudes toward themselves and others" (p. 9) and this signifies that –children are very aware of their skin color" (p. 17) and –[a]s a result, they may tend to choose friends of the same sex and the same race" (p. 18). This aligns with the observation by Girouard, Stack, & O'Neill-Gilbert (2001) that young children display –a preference for same-ethnic partners" (p. 185) during interactive play. In a recent research by MacNevin & Berman (2017), the authors noticed that young children's play episodes provided evidence of the –systems of power and oppression present in the broader social context" (p. 827). In the same vein, Stacey York (2016) shares that white children of Kindergarten age –begin to form negative attitudes about people who are

different from them, and they develop a fairly high level of rejection of other ethnic groups" (p. 20). Taken together, it can be inferred that the hegemony of whiteness does indeed enter the K-12 system with the children when they enter kindergarten (because they enter the learning environment with their prejudice developed from the social setting they come from) and so inequality and social justice issues like white privilege and whiteness has to be addressed and disrupted early-on (and continuously) within the K-12 system rather than waiting to deal with it later (or by somebody else). Also, if left unattended this can lead to bigger societal problems. This leads to the question – is the curricular material (like books) used in the classroom attending to this issue or instead normalizing the social problem? In that context, author Creighton (1997) in her paper Critical Literacy in the Elementary Classroom, shares a concern that the books used in the elementary classroom (when not chosen carefully) can send out confusing and/or demoralizing messages to the young learners leading to them realizing or believing that their culture and identity isn't important enough to be shown in books" (p. 438). As evidence, Creighton (1997) cites the following quote (given below) from a collection of written and illustrated thoughts and feelings voiced by elementary and secondary students" featured in the report Student voices: An inclusive curriculum published by City of York Board of Education (Toronto) in 1996; viz:

—When I was in grade one or two and my teacher would read a book to the class, I'd always imagine myself as the main character when she read aloud to the kids. But when she showed us the illustration, the character would be White. I was confused for a while, but I've gotten over it. - Vinh, Grade Ten" (1997, p. 49-50).

Vinh's testimony forefronts the power that books can possess on the psyche of a developing learner, especially the specific ways of being in the world are endorsed in books" and its effect on the child's developing worldview (Schieble, 2012, p. 213). Also, Vinh's claim that I've gotten over it" hints at the manifestation of internalized racism (ref: (Bivens,1995)) since Vinh's submittal indicates that he was not taught to problematicize and voice the disconnectedness in the textual illustration as a text critic and challenge the unfair privileging of certain dominant discourses in which society engages" (Coffey, 2008, p. 3). Vinh's testimonial also makes one wonder about color-blind racism: *Did the classroom teacher ever realize that there was a 'disconnect' between the 'classroom community' and the 'color of the characters' illustrated in the book she was using in her classroom and its impact on the identity and development (social and psychological) of her learners?* Even if we were to assume that the teacher was given' the book (which is also problematic since it indicates that she had no power over the choice of books in her collection) she clearly missed an opportunity to engage the kids in critical conversations" surrounding issues like (whiteness, white privilege, biases, taboo topics, discourses about race, ethnicity, and culture (REC), etc.). So, having established that books" can make, maintain or break structures of racism", the question then is – Why not design and utilize the classroom library as a strategic critical inquiry resource to start disrupting structures of racism within the elementary classroom?

### The Need to Challenge/Replace Deficit-oriented Narratives in the elementary Classroom

—[when the author was a child] assumed that books were supposed to represent another world, not anything close to my own experience, since that was the case with all the books I had ever read" (Au, 2011, p. 17).

Authors, Drs. Medina and Wohlwend, in their book Literacy, Play and Globalization', share an important observation about the children of this day and age. They state that in this era of rapid globalization and transnationalism, the children live multiliterate lives as they move as consumers and producers of knowledge across real and imagined spaces, across worlds and communities, and in textual diasporas grounded in traveling texts that flow through media, digital spaces, and the consumption structures of global markets" (2014, p. 5). They add that since reading, writing, and cultural production happen at the intersection of participation in complex worlds and discourses" the children's lived experiences" (that includes the interaction with people with varying abilities, language skills, appearances, demeanor, mannerism, tastes and preferences, etc.) cannot be and should not be ignored when visualizing literacy pedagogies that matter to/for children" (2014, p. 5). On that topic, authors Kleekamp and Zapata (2018) state that children's books that are used in classrooms should serve as mirrors and windows" to the world and so should live diverse representations of bodies, minds, and experiences" encompassing identities beyond those embodied in a classroom space" (p. 1). Unfortunately, according to authors Golos and Moses (2011), the characters with diverse cultural backgrounds and characters with disabilities have been [traditionally] neglected in children's literature, and when included, they often convey negative stereotypes" (for example - characters like Tiny Tim, Captain Hook, Longjohn Silver, Quasimodo, etc. (Prater, 1999, p. 418)) and provide false cultural information" (p. 270). Thus, given the prevalence of deficit-oriented narratives in children's literature, it is especially important that teachers carefully analyze and select the books that they plan to use in their classroom libraries (and curriculum) so that the

children in their care gain accurate and correct knowledge about the world and its inhabitants. Author Ayala (1999) echoes similar sentiments in her paper titled “*Bor Little Things*” and “*Brave Little Souls*”: The Portrayal of Individuals with Disabilities in Children’s Literature” where she states that:

—If children’s literature is to be used as a tool by educators to encourage insight in some children and validate the experiences of others, the current selection of books must mirror our society” (p. 103-117).

Moreover, the composition of the classroom library becomes even more crucial when we view it in the context that the *books* that teachers choose can influence their students’ preferences about books in general as well as these children’s values, morals, and character” while also profoundly impacting the *children’s attitudes and beliefs about themselves, other cultures, races, ethnicities, siblings, the elderly, and a myriad of other topics*” (Hall, 2004, p. 213). So, having established that the *books* that teachers use can impact intellectual and social growth and development of emergent young learners, the question then is – Why not design and utilize the classroom library as a strategic critical inquiry resource to ensure inclusivity while also creating opportunities for challenging *abelist*‘ and *dominant*‘ discourses when necessary within the elementary classroom?

### **Using Books Strategically to Encourage Critical Literacy – a Brief Synopsis**

—Critical pedagogy brings to the classroom an awareness of the structure of cultural systems and positions of power therein, and of ways in which they can positively or negatively affect groups or individuals. Critical literacy takes this one step further by helping students (and teachers) critically analyse texts and illustrations for an author’s point of view, intended audience, and elements of inclusion or bias” (Creighton, 1997, p 439).

Authors, Freebody and Freiburg (2011) warn us that students cannot properly understand text without first discerning the system and context from which it derives. In a monologic classroom where books are not read using a critical lens the book’s author will end up holding the ultimate power over the discourse - the power to privilege certain voices over others, *to determine who is heard and who is silenced*” and so in the absence of critical literacy practices with engaging with the texts the students may *tend to read submissively*” or give the text authority” (Langston-DeMott, 2016, p. 305). Hence, using a critical lens is necessary to provide ways for learners (and teachers) to connect what they are reading to their lived experiences (towards sense-making and meaning-making). In that vein, critical literacy classroom engagements (see Figure 1) when supplemented with the opportunity of accessing a variety of texts will allow for *teachers to uncover and openly discuss any underlying assumptions that may be made in the process of working with students and texts at any grade level*” (Creighton, 1997, p 440).

However, selecting and using books that challenges or promotes ideologies and concepts that is different than their own can be difficult for the teachers (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). So, if books are not carefully selected (using a set of criteria) the teachers may end up (consciously or unconsciously) selecting and using books that they are comfortable with and so end up promoting (and reinforcing) their own perspective, cultural values and worldview onto the students and the students may be left unaware that the ideas/themes/concepts exemplified within the texts are in fact open to examination. Hence, carefully selecting and using books that make them uncomfortable (by moving them beyond their worldview) will allow the teacher to also explore their own positioning, biases and blind-spots and use the book-selection activity (as they populate their classroom library) for personal growth, introspection and intellectual development. In that context, a common mistake that teacher may make is that they *may underestimate their students’ ability to deal with complicated issues and may avoid uncomfortable topics in an attempt to shelter their students from disturbing ideas*.

However, most children have experienced the death of a pet or a grandparent, and a large number of young children experience divorce, abuse, foster care, hunger, and homelessness. Books allow them an opportunity to deal with fears and resolve issues in a non-threatening way” (Hall, 2004, p. 220). In the book titled *Criticism, theory, and children’s literature*‘, author Hunt advises educators that “those who work with children and books might benefit from an insight into what is happening in texts, or what is happening with texts. . . . What is needed [however] is a way of approaching children’s literature which helps us to make informed choices” (1991, p. 6-7). Taken together, the *call*‘ is for strategically selecting books that can transform *the classroom as a space to consider and test out changes in beliefs, gender roles, and power structures*” while providing *students with an opportunity to take control over how they shape their own and one another’s lives in a safe environment*” (Hall & Piazza, 2008, p. 32). This then leads us to the question – what are some ways that the books in the classroom library can be strategically utilized as dialogic resource to promote critical literacy and critical consciousness?

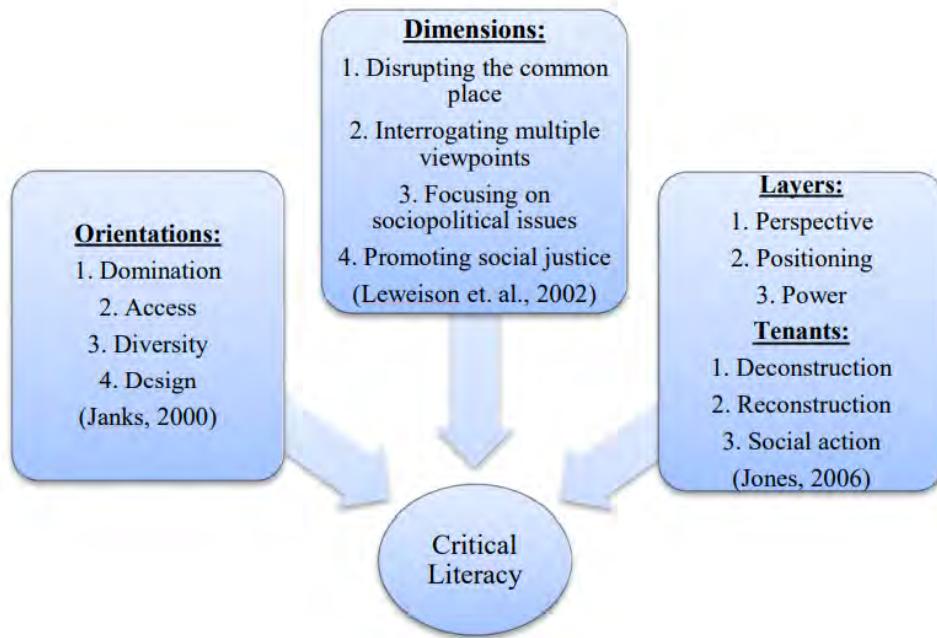


Figure 1. Orientations, Dimensions, Layers and Tenants to Critical Literacy (Langston-DeMott, 2016, p. 26)

Here is one such example - Authors, Labadie, Wetzel and Rogers (2012) suggest designing "book introductions" where the teacher introduces the book to the learners in the classroom –based on the purpose and goal of readers in a particular context" (p. 118). They believe that this –reframing" of the \_book introduction‘ practice will allow for critical interactions with the text –that are powerful for the reader" where –each time a reader approaches a text, he or she brings a unique set of perspectives and purposes to the text" (p. 118). They add that –spaces for critical literacy" open –through the careful selection of books, use of purposeful prompts, and the teacher's willingness to let silence reign during the book introduction" (p. 119). This simple (but carefully planned) approach to using (carefully selected) books in the classroom can create „new spaces‘ with opportunities for the young readers to negotiate and explore multiple social positionings (around the text they are reading) as they become critical observers and participants in actively and playfully negotiating meaning within and around the text's discourse.

Moreover, when student-led dialogues are utilized as a meaning-making and sense-making tool to encourage dialogic critical engagements in the classroom, the learners start to develop critical consciousness about the world around them and the world depicted in the book. Finally, when the learners are able to consciously engage, entertain alternate ways of being, take responsibility to inquire, and become reflexive it allows for lived experiences to become part of the discourse that then facilitates the opening of –critical spaces within which students negotiate diverse perspectives and generate knowledge that may serve their own educational and social empowerment" (Medina & Campano, 2006, p. 333). So, having established that careful selection of books and following it up with a reinvented \_book introduction“ can facilitate dialogic critical engagements within the classroom, the question then is– how can strategic book selection help reimagine the role of the teacher in the critical literacy classroom?

### Teacher as a Co-Participant

As we seek to integrate strategically chosen book readings into the classroom curriculum to encourage diversity consciousness and re-cultivate social imagination with the added agenda of disrupting dominant discourses, it is also important to briefly discuss the role of the teacher in this reimagined „dialogical“ space. According to Dr. Medina et al. (2018), when meaning making practices used in the classroom are reimagined, the role of teacher has also to be reimagined – –rather than teachers positioning themselves as the facilitator they become co-participants who are an integral part of co-construction of the learning” (p. 16). In that context, authors Van der Veen, Marjolein, & Bert (2018) share that in these new dialogic spaces, teachers as co-participants –encourage children to cross the boundaries of their own thinking, of their own voiced positions, and try to understand the position of the other. In this process, the different positions or perspectives are negotiated so both the group and

the self can progress in thinking" (p. 51). This thus provides an opportunity for the teacher to introduce and encourage difficult discourses (like topics about race, ethnicity, and culture (REC), etc. to name a few) (Note for the interested reader: Authors Howard (2010), and Vittrup, Snider, Rose, & Rippy (2016) discuss the significance and importance of REC in the classroom practices in detail).

Most importantly, this provides the teacher with an opportunity to introspect on personal development topics - for example: if the teacher is a white individual then this may be an opportunity to self-evaluate their worldview and whether they have been colorblind to aspects of white privilege and thus have been unconsciously supporting hegemony of whiteness in their teaching spaces; if the teacher is a non-white individual then they can introspect on whether they have been internalizing racism (ref: Bivens (2005)) or have been a victim of white love (ref: Spring (1998)) and so have submitted to the habitual compromise of treating hegemony of whiteness as normal in the educational domain. Either case, this provides the teacher with identifying personal barriers to developing an anti-racist worldview and to actively resist racial inequality and prejudiced injustice in their classroom pedagogy (Husband, 2012; Lea & Sims, 2004). Thus careful and strategic use of the classroom library can also help the teacher become a reflective teacher as envisioned by Dr. Greene (1995):

—Teachers imaginative enough to be present to the heterogeneity of social life and to what has been called the "heteroglossia," or the multiple discourses, of the everyday (Bakhtin, 1981) may also have strong impulses to open pathways towards better ways of teaching and better ways of life". (p. 12).

## A Framework for Critical Text Selection for the Classroom Library

Now that we have discussed all of the important key concepts that inform and inspire our vision for a dialogic classroom that will open up spaces for addressing the unchallenged, the unexamined and the intentionally neglected discourses (like discourses about REC, white privilege, white fragility, colorblind racism, to name a few), it is time to share with you our vison in the form of a framework/model that teachers can use when sifting through book databases in search of books for the classroom library that can be strategically used in the classroom to open new spaces for critical literacy engagements. So, in this section, we will begin by first presenting our framework visually (see Figure 2) and then discuss each part (see labels in Figure 2) of the framework in some detail (we will keep it as brief as possible). The idea of combining Critical Multicultural Analysis and Visual analysis (see labels B1 and B2 in Figure 2) was inspired from how Edwards (2018) successfully used this particular combination to —simplify the ability to search through large amounts of data in a systematic way" (p. 38).

By design, the framework (shown in Figure 2) can be used for any classroom library and within any subject area (do note that the teacher can easily select relevant criteria from the framework to suit their search). Thence, the framework should be traversed chronologically (the labels in Figure 2 show the chronological order). After the first pass through the framework with a selected book, the framework can be re-used until the teacher has found enough books to create an inclusive classroom library for the upcoming school year.

### Select a Candidate 'Book' from a Database: Label A

Research studies that have documented how teachers select or gain access to books (for example: (Friese et al, 2008), (Stallworth et al, 2006), (Voelker, 2013), (Watkins & Ostensen, 2015), etc.) list a variety of sources that teachers have used including – prior knowledge and expertise, recommendations from colleagues, access to a book catalog, school library database, etc. No matter what the selection criteria is to gain access to a candidate book (for the classroom library), the framework shown in Figure 2 starts when the teacher gets access to a book to evaluate whether it can be strategically used in the classroom curriculum. However, we recommend the use of a large database for this first step, a database/list like the Teacher's Choice Reading List so that the teacher has access to relevant, age appropriate and teacher-tested material and so can select from a larger pool of appropriate books and also not be limited by the size of the database.

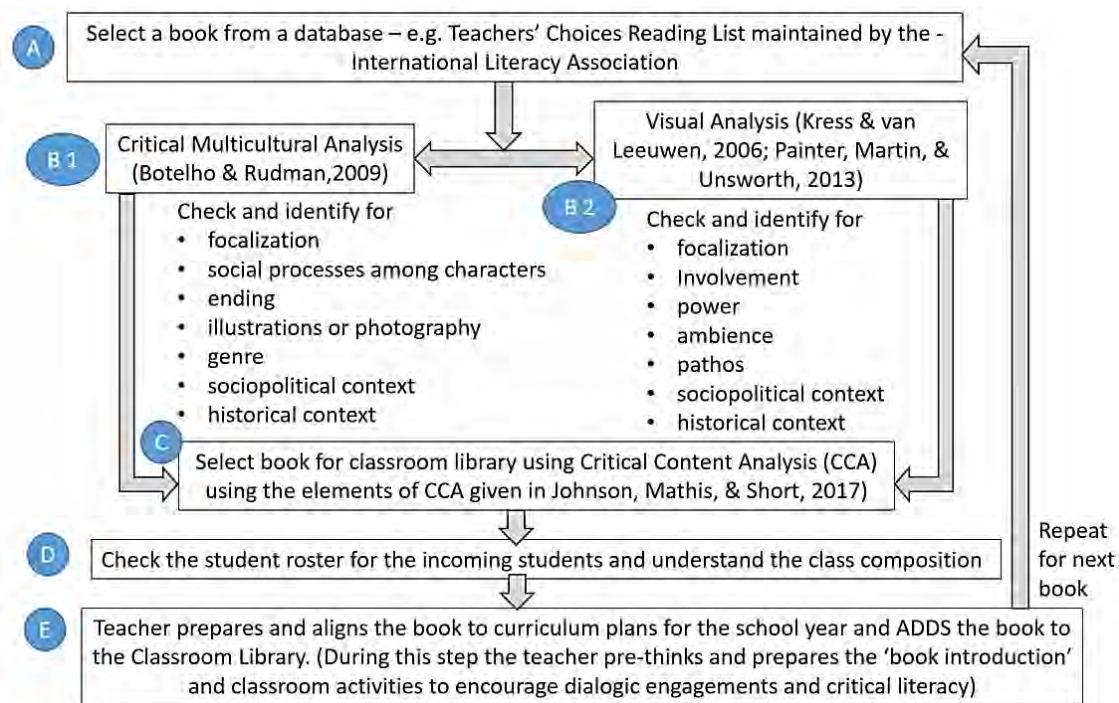


Figure 2. Critical Text Selection Framework

### Critical Multicultural Analysis: Label B1 & Visual Analysis: Label B2

Once the teacher has selected a candidate book, we recommend that the teacher conduct a *Critical Multicultural Analysis* (CMA) on the candidate book. We recommend the use of the seven criteria that Botelho and Rudman (2009) use/recommend (see Table 1): viz *focalization*, *social processes among characters*, *story closure (ending)*, *illustrations or photography*, *genre*, *sociopolitical context*, and *historical context*.

Table 1. Guiding questions for CMA [adapted in modified form from (Botelho &amp; Rudman, 2009)]

focalization	Whose story is this? From what point of view? Who sees? Who is observed?
social processes among characters	How is power exercised? Who has agency? Who resists and challenges domination and collusion? Who speaks and who is silenced? Who acts? And who is acted upon? Who waits? What reading subject positions are offered by these texts?
story closure (ending)	How did the writer close the story? What are the assumptions imbedded in this closure? Is the ending ideologically open or closed?
illustrations or photography	How does the selection of photographs as well as angles, details, and poses, all contribute to constructing a perspective as forcefully as a sketch or a painting might?
genre	How the genres position the characters and the reader; what subject positions are offered by each genre; and, how these genres organize the reader's perceptions of reality by managing ideology?
sociopolitical context	What cultural statements (in literary and nonliterary texts) is this book responding to? What dominant messages about race, gender, and class are imbedded in the book reviews, research, and other literature about these books? What is the sociopolitical context of the cultural theme present in the text?
historical context	What are some historical developments of the cultural theme?

If the candidate book has visual features, we recommend that the teacher conduct a *Visual Analysis* (VA) on the candidate book. We recommend the use of the following criteria that Edwards, 2018, uses/recommends (see Table 2): viz *focalization*, *involvement*, *power*, *ambience*, *pathos*, *sociopolitical context*, and *historical context*.

Table 2. Guiding Questions for VA [adapted in modified form from (Edwards, 2018), (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) & (Painter, Martin, & Unsworth, 2013)]

focalization	Is the character using an observational or contacting gaze with the reader?
involvement	Is the character involved or detached from the reader?
power	What or who is looking down on the character? What or who is looking up at the character?
ambience	Are the colors activated or denied? If they are activated, then are the colors vibrant or muted, warm or cool, familiar or removed?
pathos	Are the characters alienated or engaged? If they are engaged, then are they displayed as appreciative, empathic, or personalizing?
sociopolitical context	What cultural statements is the visuals in the book responding to? What dominant visual about race, gender, and class are imbedded in the book? What is the sociopolitical context of the cultural theme present in the illustrations?
historical context	What are some visible historical developments of the cultural theme?

**Note:** It is highly recommended that as the teacher analyzes the candidate book (CMA & VA) that the teacher simultaneously record their answers to each guiding question (ref: Table 1 and Table 2) and then re-read the book to re-verify/solidify their answers. Once the CMA and VA stage of the framework is completed the teacher can advance to the next level (Label C) within this framework.

### Select (or Reject) the Candidate ‘Book’ Using Critical Content Analysis: Label C

At this stage, the teacher can adapt a specific critical lens or questioning stance as their frame from which to conduct a critical content analysis (CCA) of the candidate book. A suggested set of elements by Johnson, Mathis, and Short (2017) for conducting the CCA is shown in Figure 3.

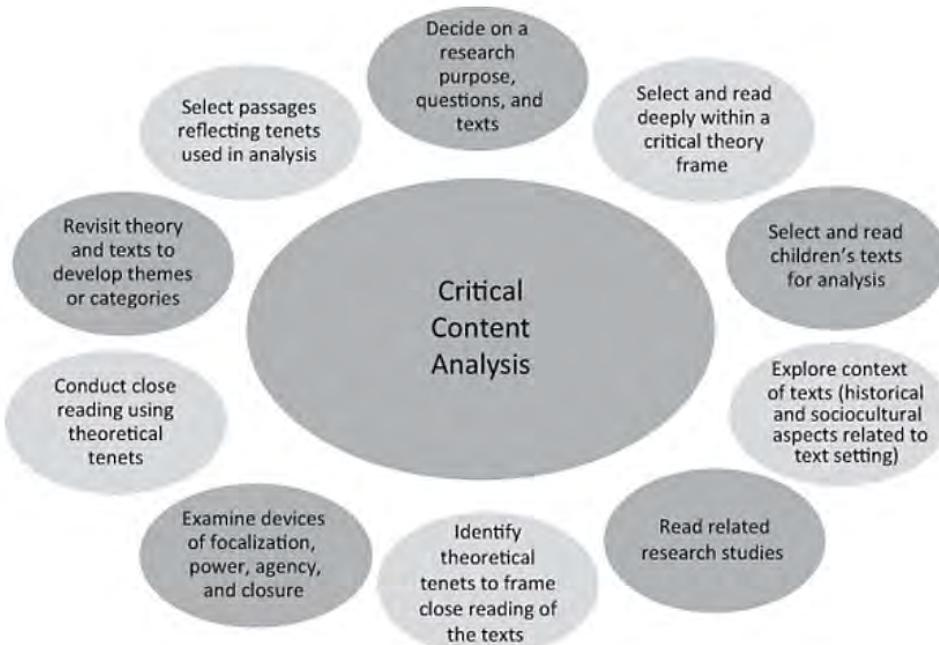


Figure 3. Elements of Critical Content Analysis by Johnson, Mathis, and Short (2017)

The answers from the CMA and VA can be used as data (that can be coded, categorized, grouped by theme etc.) by the teacher when conducting the CCA. The critical stance that the teacher adapts at this stage in the framework (guided by their experience and classroom need) will guide the CCA, for example a -critical stance often includes questioning the concept of -truth and how it is presented, by whom, and for what purposes. Other questions also emerge around whose values, texts, and ideologies are privileged or considered normative. A critical stance focuses on voice and who gets to speak, whose story is told, and in what ways. Groups

marginalized based on gender, language, culture and race, and sexual orientation" (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017, p. 5) are examples of common focus" at this stage in this framework. Ultimately, it is key to remember that CCA is "embedded in a tension" and driven by the "compelling interest" of the teacher "in exploring texts around a focus that matters to the" teacher and their learners (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017, p. 7).

#### **Understand the Class Composition and Align the Book to the Curriculum and Add it to the Classroom Library: Label D & E**

These two stages are self-explanatory. At these stages the teacher can ensure that (or evaluate) the candidate book (that has successfully "passed" the CCA stage) aligns with the needs of the classroom and its learners. It is at this stage that the teacher starts to plan the *strategic use of the selected book* for critical literacy activities and engagements in the classroom. Some guiding questions for this stage include (Note: *We are only providing a sample set of questions here because the 'strategy' is ultimately up to the teacher to decide*) -

- Will this book help initiate and engage a dialogic conversation around \_\_\_\_\_?
- Will I be able to create (using this book) activities and dialogues that will afford the learners the opportunity to look inwards at their uniqueness of thought and at how they see/conceptualize the issue/event/topic in the light of their lived experiences?
- Will this book allow for classroom activities that can encourage in generating multiple perspective by the participants giving the activity an interesting and "playful" twist (a twist that can be utilized for dialogic engagement around taboo topics).
- Will the book allow for the sharing of "students' voices" and "interior lives" (Medina et al, 2018, p. 340-41) since this sharing is vital to the goal of developing critical consciousness? Is the book suited for re-reading, re-telling and storytelling activities?
- Can the book present the opportunity to understand and interpret one's own experiences and that of others – opportunities that are essential in promoting empathy and awareness?
- Can the book help with "posing questions" about "solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 3)?

**Note:** After stage/Label E, the framework restarts with a new candidate book. Alternatively the framework can also be used/traversed as shown in Figure 4.

#### **An Alternate Way to Traverse the Critical Text Selection Framework**

For scenarios where a team of teachers are looking for multiple books around the "same" topic, the framework presented in Figure 2 can be altered from a sequential traversal to a parallel-series traversal as shown in Figure 4. This altered framework can accommodate/facilitate collaborative critical text selection for a team of teacher (like teachers at the same grade level teaching their own individual classroom sections) where they can now individually complete Labels A, B1 and B2 (from Figure 2) and then get together during the CCA stage to collaboratively then align the books to their respective curriculum.

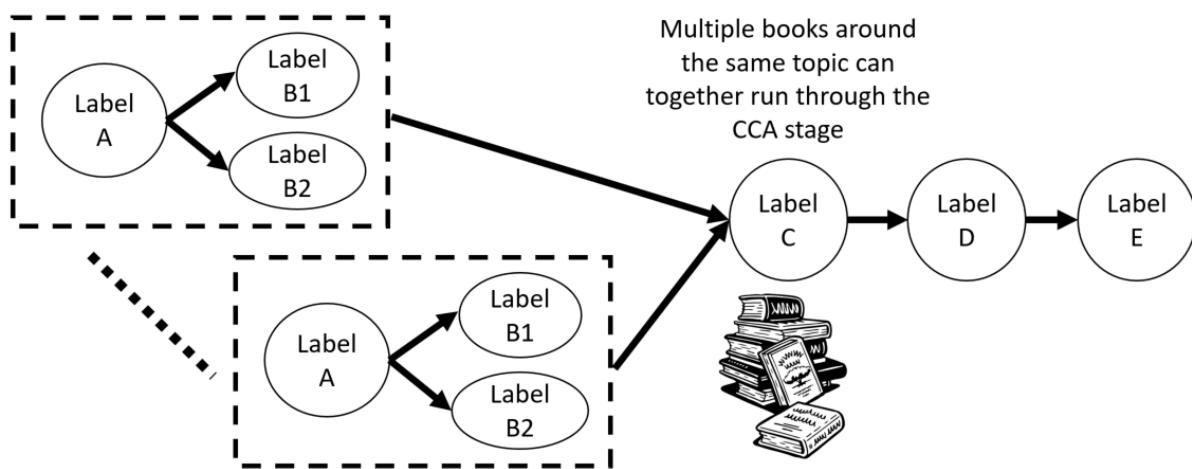


Figure 4. An Alternate Way to Traverse the Framework shown in Figure 2

## Discussion

While most of Section 2 of this paper was dedicated to answering RQ1, the framework presented in the previous section (Section 3) answers RQ3 in that it provides guidelines that an elementary classroom teacher can use when building their classroom library. Once the classroom library is populated with books that provide strategic assistance to the teacher to engage in critical literacy practices in the classroom the job of teacher is then to use the books strategically in helping fuel dialogic engagements in the classroom that forefronts the belief –that students‘ ideas will transform classroom discourse, other students‘ understandings, and even their own understandings” (Aukerman, 2013, p. 6). This will allow for opening new spaces for critical literacy engagements.

Another important aspect of using books strategically for critical literacy is the use of story-telling and re-telling in the classroom In his paper, author Dr. Sumara discusses the significance of storytelling and re-telling/reading to meaning making. He states that —while it is interesting for readers to look back and notice how they have responded to characters and situations after their first pass through the text, it is more interesting to notice these markings during successive readings.” (1998, p.206). He adds that —as readers come to identify with characters who are not themselves, and become involved in plots that are not their own, they must form alliances between their own experiences and those of the characters” (1998, p.206). This observation is vital to answering RQ2 in that by encouraging personal stories (in response to the book reading), the storytelling and re-telling (facilitated in the classroom culture) the students will be able to \_connect“ with their classmates more consciously and empathetically thus helping them redevelop their social imagination around diversity. Another important note from Dr. Sumara’s paper that is worth noting in the context of RQ2 is that:

—It is during the practice of rereading that students begin to notice the traces of a “previous reader identity” in their text. As they move through the rereading experience, students become aware that, not only has the knowledge that emerged from their first reading shifted but, importantly, so too has their reading self” (1998, p.207).

In the same vein, the classroom library books can also facilitate the use of imaginative practices in the classroom. For example, the students can use hot-seating to —re-imagine and re-contextualize what it is they are reading from the” book —irrelation to their own set of beliefs, attitudes and experiences” that —shifts the meaning of the text to become more personalized, social and relational”. This shift is the core of our reimaged classroom practices‘ objective since we are interested in moving away from —linear forms of interpretations” to instead encourage the emergence of meaning making in an —actively negotiated” encounter that is facilitated by carefully selecting books to be used in the classroom (Medina et al., 2018, p. 11).

Between the re-reading of the books and the use of imaginative practices (like hot seating), the stories —can be retold over and over” among the group/learners and this can be utilized in the classroom to foreground the understanding of how —the context and conditions of reading alter the shape of the event of storytelling and the trajectory of meaning” (Sumara, 1998, p. 204). This allows for reimagining the classroom space where this re-reading can take place to utilize reading as an —act of identity making” (Sumara, 1998, p. 205). This identity making can be further explored/studied using creative practices like writing-in-role providing the teacher with a form of assessment tool as they make note of incremental progress within the implementation plan.

This also aligns the primary view/intention (towards instilling critical consciousness) with Dr. Dennis Sumara’s view of identity making where identity is understood as —something that co-emerges with one’s ever-shifting geographical, interpersonal, and intertextual experiences, and that identity is always the product of the interpretive work done around the continual fusing of past, present, and projected senses of self”. For example, the writing-in-role will allow the students/learners —to look back and notice how they have responded to characters and situations after their first pass through the” text, subsequently it will be even —more interesting to notice these markings during successive” engagements with the same or similar books since it will help study identity making/development with respect to critical consciousness as a response to the engagements and activities (Sumara, 1998, p. 206). The concept of —horizontal reading” discussed by Dr. Dennis Sumara (1998) also fits in very well with how meaning making is understood and foregrounded in this reimaged classroom that we are envisioning. As already discussed (earlier in this section), the implementation encourages the use of immigrant stories as —horizontal reading.” This horizontal reading can also allow for —juxtaposing” and —chaining” within the implementation plan to help develop —interpretive links” and —interpreted bridges” in the learners/students as they incrementally —respond to the text differently (with every pass) and, as a consequence, generate new knowledge and alter their reading identities” (Sumara, 1998, p. 207).

## Conclusion

As can be seen from the implementation framework presented (in Figure 2) and discussed (in sections 2, 3 and 4), *\_dialogic comprehension-as-sensemaking pedagogy* is at the heart of the design. All throughout the implementation plan of strategically using the classroom library to open new spaces for critical literacy engagements, the highlight was on the importance of the *\_conversation* over the *\_conclusion* indicating that the interest is in sensemaking pedagogy not simply as a matter of —nurturing and celebrating student understandings, but rather of engaging students in dialogue about text in which understandings are transformed through encountering the understandings of others” (Aukerman, 2013, p. 6). Also, the final goal of the classroom library is to enable critical pedagogical practices like story-telling and retelling. This is evidence that the interest in sensemaking pedagogy is an essential part of cultivating critical consciousness and the redevelopment of social imagination (that is inclusive of identity-making as well). The framework and methodology presented in this paper (by design) pre-positions (and sometimes even re-positions) the teacher as a co-participant (in the classroom) to support *—radically different understandings* while also honoring *—this kind of intellectual* meaning making even when it may (or may-not) align with his/her own thinking of sense-making (Aukerman, 2013, p. 5). By carefully selecting the classroom library books, the teachers can now reinvent themselves from being seen as *\_providers of information* (as would be the norm in a monologically organized classroom) to now be seen as facilitators who (with their carefully selected books) help the learners become agentive actors who see *—discussion with peers as a way of helping further their own textual understandings*, and look upon the teacher as someone who seeks *—to understand and learn from student textual perspectives*” (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2015, p. 115).

In summary, as already discussed in this document, the *\_strategic* nature of using books also hints at utilizing *—reading comprehension as agentive meditational meaning making*” to help create *—new spaces as forms of participation in classrooms, centering students voices, where new forms of knowledge are made available and where complex remixings of texts and discourses emerge”* (Medina et al., 2018, p. 2, p.18). It should be clear by now that the *\_Critical Text Selection* affords the participants *—the agency of discovery learning*” and *—the sanctity of free expression”* (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014, p. 26). Also, from the discussion presented earlier in this section it should be evident that the project is specifically designed to help *\_teachers* position their learners as agentive actors. In conclusion, we will like to quote from Drs. Medina and Wohlwend book (2014) regarding the importance of creating new spaces for critical literacy engagements

*—(o)nce a space was opened in the classroom to deliberately bring, improvise, and play around popular culture imaginaries, the students enacted a sense of agency and empowerment in collectively scripting, creating, and improvising other kinds of texts and identities”* (p. 90)

The framework and ideas presented in this paper too aims at opening such a space in the quest to cultivate critical consciousness alongside the production of new knowledge. We conclude this paper with the sincere hope that teacher-scholars and educators will find our ideas interesting enough to consider adapting and improving upon the *\_Critical Text Selection* framework that was presented in the paper.

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