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Creating a Third Space through Intertextuality: Using Children’s Literature to Develop Prospective Teachers’ Critical Literacy

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Abstract: Critical literacy works to make readers aware of the explicit and implicit ideologies present in texts. Engaging in critical reading helps readers recognize and interrogate ideologies in texts in order to be more informed readers. This action research study examined the development of critical literacy skills in 19 prospective elementary teachers across three weeks of a semester-long undergraduate children’s literature course. Researchers, who were also course instructors, intentionally paired texts to help students enter a Third Space in which they could practice intertextuality (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). The Third Space afforded ideological distance from both the students’ personal ideologies and those inherent (and often unrecognized) in texts, thus allowing students to better connect and critique messages within and across texts. Researchers engaged in first- and second-cycle coding and collaborative discussion of students’ written responses to texts and discussion transcripts. Findings suggest that pairing texts with similar themes allows students to begin to uncover implicit ideologies and reevaluate their stances both toward the literature and to their own ideological beliefs. However, quality of discussion, background knowledge, and emotional connection to the literature and/or the topic may also affect the ways in which students critically engage with texts in the Third Space.

Keywords: critical literacy; children’s literature; intertextuality; prospective teachers; ideology



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Introduction¹

Literature written for and about children contains layers of meaning that function on multiple levels given that these texts have a shared audience of both children and adults (Nodelman, 2008). Children's books carry explicit messages the author wishes to convey, but they also carry implicit messages based on a time period's values and the author's and/or society's view of children and childhood (Hollindale, 1988; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). Critically reading a text involves reading to uncover implicit and explicit messages and/or instances of marginalization or bias—often, but not always, using a theory such as postcolonialism, feminism, Marxism, and others to provide an analytic lens (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017). Since critical reading involves analyzing and questioning a text's messages/ideologies (both explicit and implicit) and the resulting silencing or marginalizing of voices, critical reading is a form of critical literacy (Luke, 2012). However, critical reading and critical literacy are not synonymous with critical thinking. Critical thinking involves analyzing, synthesizing, problem-solving, predicting, and hypothesizing (Angelo, 1995; Kurfiss, 1988). While these skills are necessary to engage in critical literacy, they do not necessarily involve highlighting or questioning issues of power, silencing, and marginalization, which is at the heart of critical literacy.

With the proliferation of public platforms of expression through the Internet and social media, people in the 21st century can instantaneously share thoughts and call them “facts” or decry accounts they disagree with as “fake.” As individuals are inundated with information, engaging in critical literacy becomes even more crucial to determine “What is ‘truth’? How is it presented and represented, by whom, and in whose interests?” (Luke, 2012, p. 4). It is especially important, then, for teachers to develop critical literacy skills—not only so that they can identify implicit messages/ideologies in texts they share with their students, but also to foster their students' own critical literacy skills (Apol, 1998). However, these skills are often difficult to develop.

When teaching prospective teachers in an undergraduate children's literature course, we (Tracy, Lisa, and Laura) have found that rather than engage with issues of power, bias, or marginalization, our students often focus on a book's surface-level elements and appropriateness for children. For example, when asked to share their initial thoughts about children's literature, students often respond that children will like brightly colored pictures, funny storylines, and cute characters. When students move on to identify implicit messages in texts, they tend to focus on appropriateness or inappropriateness (including

¹ We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this

article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

illustrations or text depicting “taboo” topics such as smoking, drinking, gangs, and so on). While in these instances, students are beginning to question messages communicated to children in a text, their interrogations tend to remain on the surface rather than raising questions about issues of power, point of view, ideology, and so on. Even when we have posed specific questions to stimulate critical reading such as “Whose story is being told? Whose story is not being told?” students often answer literally, responding that they are provided the focal characters’ stories but not those of secondary characters.

One way to help students move beyond surface-level understandings of texts and support the development of critical literacy may be to juxtapose texts (i.e., engage in intertextuality) as this can highlight multiple perspectives (Johnson et al., 2017; Vasquez, 2003). Therefore, in this action research study, we brought together books with similar themes written in different time periods. We paired *Curious George* (Rey, 1969) with *The One and Only Ivan* (Applegate, 2012) and *Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla* (Applegate, 2014) to determine whether and in what ways leveraging intertextuality to create a Third Space (Tracey & Morrow, 2012) might provide undergraduate prospective teachers with distance from their personal ideologies and those embedded in texts, and might, in the process, help them critically read those texts.

Literature Review

To examine this study’s underlying concepts, the following paragraphs focus on ideology, critical literacy, and intertextuality. We begin by defining and discussing implicit and explicit forms of ideology in literature. Then we describe critical literacy skills which are necessary for readers to identify and question ideologies. Next, we explore

the challenges involved in developing critical literacy skills, especially as they relate to prospective teachers. Finally, we highlight the potential benefits of intertextuality (i.e., encouraging readers to make connections between paired texts) to illuminate ideologies and engage in critical literacy.

Uncovering Textual Ideologies

All texts contain ideology because they are based in language: “A narrative without an ideology is unthinkable: ideology is formulated in and by language, meanings within language are socially determined, and narratives are constructed out of language” (Stephens, 1992, p. 8). We define ideology as a set of ideas shared by a group/society to make sense of the world (McCallum & Stephens, 2011). Ideology includes views related to politics, culture, economics, and identity such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. These ideas affect power distribution and relations (Parsons, 2011). Children’s literature, in particular, is ideological because it is written by adults for children, so embedded within these books are values for how to act and behave in society, used as a form of socialization (Apol, 1998; Nodelman, 2008; Stephens, 1992).

While authors may explicitly promote ideologies in a text, their unexamined assumptions are also present, as are the (often invisible) ideas and values from the culture and world in which the book is written and produced (Hollindale, 1988). It is important to identify and interrogate these implicit ideologies in order to more thoroughly evaluate what is being read. However, identifying a text’s ideologies is most difficult when the ideology in question matches the reader’s own unexamined beliefs and “common-sense assumptions” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 4), thereby taking the form of “assumed social structures and habits of thought” (Stephens, 1992, p. 9). In these instances, the text may seem “ideology-free,” when in fact it is laden

with ideologies that are so closely aligned with the reader's beliefs that the reader accepts them as being "neutral"—"universal truths"—and therefore invisible (McCallum & Stephens, 2011; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003).

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy pedagogies work to make readers aware of ideologies so those readers do not accept unexamined belief systems as truth or unconsciously reproduce social and cultural norms (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Though challenging, critically reading texts is something elementary students (e.g., Labadie, Pole, & Rogers, 2013; Peterson & Chamberlain, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2009) and teachers can do.

To engage in critical literacy, readers must recognize that sociopolitical structures privilege some groups over others (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Critical literacy "has an explicit aim of the critique and transformation of dominant ideologies, cultures and economies, and institutions and political systems" (Luke, 2012, p. 5). In an era of uncertainty about what counts as legitimate and authentic, people need to be able to interrogate the evidence provided, identify the author's underlying goal, and evaluate their own engagement not only with literature, but with all text types (print, digital, visual, aural, multimedia, and so on) they encounter in daily life. They need to ask who has power in telling the story and what implications that power has for who is legitimized, which messages are promoted, and what people are led to believe—making this social justice work important as well as complex and difficult.

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Often, teachers have concerns about lack of time and possible resistance from parents to the introduction of controversial topics and stances (Cho, 2015; Lee, 2011; Skerrett, 2010). Teachers may also view critical literacy simply as an extension of critical thinking (i.e., problem-solving, predicting, and analyzing) rather than as a means of enacting social justice (Cho, 2015; Lee, 2011). In addition, prospective teachers have demonstrated resistance to engaging in critical reading themselves. They have indicated reluctance to critique texts they liked as children (McNair, 2003) or that they feel would have still have didactic potential even when presented with a text's historical inaccuracies (Apol, Sakuma, Reynolds, & Rop, 2002). Often, they have expressed views that children would not understand

the deeper meanings in texts or see books' inherent racism and/or stereotypes (Apol et al., 2002; McNair, 2003), even though studies have illustrated that elementary students can use children's literature to develop critical literacy skills (e.g., Labadie et al., 2013; Peterson & Chamberlain, 2015; Souto-

Manning, 2009).

In order to support students' development, teachers need to understand and practice critical literacy (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006). If teachers are able to view texts' multiple meanings and messages, they become more open to their students' varied interpretations, and if they can distance themselves from a text to critically analyze it, they are more able to help students do the same (Apol, 1998). Therefore, our intention—to help teachers develop requisite critical literacy skills—includes working as teacher educators with the prospective teachers in our teacher education classes through the pairing of texts.

Intertextuality

Given that ideologies are often implicit and given that developing and teaching critical literacy for social justice is both complex and challenging, pairing texts has the potential to provide contexts that help readers notice seemingly “common-sense” assumptions (Johnson et al., 2017; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003; Vasquez, 2003). Readers can gain distance from or perspective on a text as they use intertextuality (i.e., make connections across texts) to engage in critical literacy.

Educators have long paired texts or used groups of related texts, often called “text sets” (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988), to support readers of all ages in making connections across texts to deepen understandings of theme, genre, characters, and author/illustrator moves (e.g., Elish-Piper, Wold, & Schwingendorf, 2014; Fahrenbruck, Schall, Short, Smiles, & Storie, 2006; Short, 1992; Sipe, 2000; Wold & Elish-Piper, 2009). However, less has been written about how text sets can support critical literacy development.

Researchers (e.g., Labadie et al., 2013; Souto-Manning, 2009) have found that text sets allowed elementary students to consider multiple perspectives and revisit key ideas for deeper discussion and critique. In their work with prospective teachers, Apol and colleagues (2002) used multiple texts depicting the United States-Japan conflict during World War II in their children’s literature class “to help students discover for themselves how teller, purpose, perspective, and audience shape a narrative” (p. 434). The researchers surmised that making connections across these texts would allow students to more readily identify ideologies as well as interrogate their own assumptions and beliefs, as was the case when Apol (1998) paired two books about slavery in another study.

Theoretical Framework: Third Space Theory

Pairing texts has the potential to help readers achieve ideological distance by moving them away from their own beliefs, as well as away from a single text, into a Third Space where readers can leverage intertextuality. Third Space Theory scholars believe that students learn best in a separate Third Space in which they use their personal knowledge along with experiences from their First Space interactions to help them learn academic discourses that exist in their Second Space (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Third Space Theory is social learning theory and therefore involves the social construction of knowledge for which discussion can act as a mediational tool (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). In our application of Third Space Theory, we see students’ First Spaces as encompassing ideologies of which they are unaware because they have grown up with these belief systems and therefore view them as natural, “the way things are,” or “common sense.” Students then encounter a particular text’s implicit and explicit ideologies in a Second Space. These ideologies may not be apparent when students already are invested in the text and/or when the ideologies match the students’ personal beliefs. However, our claim is that introducing additional related texts can help students move into a Third Space that provides ideological distance from both the First and Second Spaces and offers an arena in which they can view and interrogate their own and the texts’ ideological assumptions. It is this belief—that reading multiple texts provides students with a Third Space in which intertextual interrogation of ideas and messages can occur—that we examine in our study.

Methods

Given the challenges many readers experience engaging in critical literacy, we hypothesized that intentionally pairing texts from distinct time periods would help undergraduate students enter a Third

Space of intertextual interrogation—critical reading. In previous work with undergraduates, we had paired the fictional novel, *The One and Only Ivan* (Applegate, 2012) with the nonfiction picturebook of the same event *Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla* (Applegate, 2014). Initially, the purpose of this pairing was to foreground issues of genre. Both books tell of a silverback gorilla, Ivan, who is taken from his home in the jungle by poachers and sold in the United States to a couple who kept him as a pet until he became too large and destructive for their home. Then they transferred him to a cage in a shopping mall circus. The novel tells of Ivan’s life in the mall from his point of view with additional characters that stimulate and highlight Ivan’s growing frustration at being kept in a shopping mall cage. The picturebook presents a shortened nonfiction account of Ivan’s life as a young gorilla through his time in the mall to his eventual relocation to the Atlanta Zoo. We used these texts to examine how issues of genre and point of view (namely how the fictional account versus the nonfiction account, including the change from first-person to third-person point of view) affected students’ engagement with the texts. However, our desire to help students develop critical literacy skills caused us to revisit this pairing, adding a third text from a different time period.

For our third text, we wanted to select a book with multiple similarities (characters, storyline, themes) a book that students likely had read during childhood and that was typically well-liked by children and classroom teachers. We chose *Curious George* (Rey, 1969) because most of our students are middle class, U.S-born., and would have grown up with *Curious*

George firmly entrenched in popular culture through its long series of books, TV shows, movies, and merchandise. Our goal with this study was to answer the question: *In what ways, if at all, can reading books from distinct time periods and scaffolding undergraduate prospective teachers’ engagement in intertextual comparisons help those prospective teachers develop critical reading skills?*

Design

To address this research question, we engaged in action research because it focuses on solving an educational problem and improving learning and professional practice. Action research involves

“systematic procedures done by teachers...to gather information about, and subsequently improve, the ways their particular educational setting operates, their teaching, and their student learning” (Creswell, 2012, p. 577). Therefore, this method allowed us to better understand and address a problem encountered in our teaching of undergraduate

children’s literature courses—i.e., how to help prospective teachers develop critical literacy skills. Creswell explains that engaging in action research involves choosing a focal area based on instructional reflection, determining data collection techniques, systematically analyzing and interpreting data, and developing action plans. Our focal area was critical literacy skills. We collected data from students’ written reflections of the texts and transcripts of their small- and large-group discussions, and we analyzed it through multiple cycles of coding and discussion—all of which (including our eventual action plan consisting of considerations for future practice) are described below.

“In what ways, if at all, can reading books from distinct time periods and scaffolding undergraduate prospective teachers’ engagement in intertextual comparisons help those prospective teachers develop critical reading skills?”

Context

We studied one section of an undergraduate children's literature course offered at a Midwestern university with a large College of Education.² Our sample consisted of nineteen students ranging from freshman through junior class standing. At this point in their program of study, most had not yet formally been accepted into the College of Education, which means most had had limited experience working with children in teaching roles. Sixteen out of the nineteen students were White females, which is reflective of most U.S. education programs' demographics (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2018).

The course focuses on reading and responding to children's and young adult literature. A goal for the course is that students engage with children's literature as readers first, rather than immediately imagine how to teach specific texts. Students are required to read a range of novels and picturebooks, and to reflect on these texts using various lenses—analyzing literary and artistic elements, constructing personal responses, making intertextual connections, and reading critically to interrogate textual messages, presentations, and ideologies. Students are assigned a focal text for each lens and engage in discussion and written reflection to develop their understanding and use of the lenses. The use of lenses, discussion, and reflection help students engage deeply with children's literature rather than imagine ancillary activities for hypothetical students.

In past iterations of the course, we as instructors have found the critical lens to be the most difficult for our students to use. We hypothesized that by introducing related texts in classroom discussions, students would be able to distance themselves from

the texts under analysis and enter a Third Space of intertextual interrogation that would help them identify the literature's implicit ideologies and facilitate critical analysis. Text juxtaposition would occur in addition to the discussions and written reflections which students already engaged in throughout the course. This study took place near the beginning of the semester, and students had not received any prior instruction about critical literacy in this course.

Tracy taught the section of the course under study, helped conceptualize the project, and collected and analyzed the data. Lisa had previously taught the course and was involved with project conceptualization and later data analysis. Laura was the faculty leader overseeing the course and helped with project conceptualization and analysis.

Procedures

This study occurred throughout portions of class meetings in the third through fifth weeks of the course (summarized in Figure 1). During the first meeting (week three), Tracy read aloud *Curious George* (Rey, 1969) stopping occasionally to engage students in discussion. Then, students were asked to respond in writing to the open-ended prompt "What did you think about *Curious George*?" Students could respond to the text, the illustrations, or any other connection they found appropriate and interesting. They were given time in and outside of class for this written response but were asked to craft responses between 200-400 words.

In subsequent weeks, students were divided into two groups. During the second meeting (week four), Group A read the nonfiction picturebook version of

² This research was approved by the IRB board, and participating students signed an IRB-approved consent form.

	Group A	Group B
Week 3	In class: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to <i>Curious George</i> read-aloud • Respond to quick-write prompt: “What did you think about <i>Curious George</i>?” 	
Week 4	In class: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read <i>Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla</i> (the picturebook) 	In class: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small-group discussions of textbook readings
Homework assignment for both groups to be completed before Week 5: Read <i>The One and Only Ivan</i> (the novel), write discussion questions, and analyze textual elements in the novel including imagery, symbolism, point-of-view, etc.		
Week 5	In class: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small-group discussions of textbook reading • Videos of Ivan in the mall • Small-group discussion of both <i>Ivan</i> texts • Whole-group discussion of both <i>Ivan</i> texts • Second read-aloud of <i>Curious George</i> • Respond to quick-write prompts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Which <i>Ivan</i> text do you believe readers should read first and why?” ○ “Which <i>Ivan</i> text did you find more compelling and why?” ○ “How/does your reading, discussion, and reflection of the <i>Ivan</i> stories change the way you think about <i>Curious George</i>?” 	In class: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read <i>Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla</i>

Figure 1. Group Tasks by Week

Ivan's story (Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla, Applegate, 2014) in class while Group B completed an alternate unrelated assignment.³ As out-of-class homework, both Group A and Group B read the novel, *The One and Only Ivan* (Applegate, 2012); after reading, they crafted discussion questions and conducted initial written analysis of textual elements such as point of view, theme, symbolism, and characterization.

During the third meeting (week five), Group B read the nonfiction picturebook while Group A completed the alternate assignment. Afterward, the entire class watched videos the instructor found online of Ivan in his cage at the mall, and students met in five small groups for discussion of the texts. These discussions were driven by their previously created/completed discussion questions and textual analyses, as well as by their reactions to the novel, the picturebook, and the Ivan videos. After small group discussion, the entire class met to elaborate on topics from their small groups.

Following the whole-group discussion, the instructor re-read *Curious George* (Rey, 1969) aloud, and students responded in writing to three questions: (1) "Which *Ivan* text do you believe readers should read first and why?" (2) "Which *Ivan* text did you find more compelling and why?" and (3) "How/does your reading, discussion, and reflection of the *Ivan* stories change the way you think about *Curious George*?" Students were asked to write about 150-200 words per question.

Data Collection and Analysis

To analyze students' responses within the frame of critical reading, we collected their various quick-

writes from across the sessions: their initial response to *Curious George*, the two questions comparing their responses to the *Ivan* texts, and their responses after the second reading of *Curious George*. We also recorded and transcribed students' small-group and large-group discussions after reading the *Ivan* texts.

Data analysis was recursive and ongoing as we reviewed the students' quick-writes and discussed with one another our memos and emerging conclusions. At the end of the collection period, Tracy and Lisa reviewed the quick-writes separately and engaged in first-cycle coding, assigning holistic codes to mark general emerging themes (Saldaña, 2016). Rather than completing line-by-line coding, we felt identifying themes across longer passages (i.e., assigning holistic codes) captured the main ideas of students' thinking. Then we wrote analytic memos, and Tracy and Lisa compared their observations in discussion with Laura. This discussion enabled us to refine our holistic codes to include "human-animal interactions," "the focus on appropriateness for children," "Ivan/George as a child/human or an animal," "humans with/abusing power," and "animal rights" (Table 1). We also highlighted passages where students seemed to align themselves with the texts' ideologies and where they seemed to question and/or resist these ideologies. We grouped students' responses chronologically and identified patterns in these codes related to their initial reactions to *Curious George*, their reactions to the *Ivan* texts, and their reactions to *Curious George* after reading the *Ivan* texts (Table 2). This allowed us to draw conclusions about students' development of critical literacy. We then engaged in second-cycle focused coding (Saldaña, 2016) and additional discussion to collapse these codes into general themes related to colonizer/colonized paradigms

³ Replicating instruction from prior semesters, half of the class read the picturebook first and half read the novel first to determine if text order impacted student

engagement with the *Ivan* texts. However, we were unable to determine any discernible difference.

Table 1

Example Holistic Codes and Their Application

Holistic code	Example Student Responses
human-animal interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I feel like this [the <i>Ivan</i> novel] gives us a more humanistic way of viewing it, like a way we can empathize, 'cause without those other interactions, since we're such social animals, we would not have been able to understand how he felt, 'cause we're not gorillas.” ● “Do you think that animals can be sad depressed or jealous or do you think that it's just like they're just human emotions that we project on animals?”
appropriateness for children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “It [<i>Curious George</i>] contains words and illustrations that are appropriate for a young reader (or listener). The content does not have any questionable word choices or scenes that feature adult content, while the illustrations are fun, colorful and very bright, capturing the attention of youth.” ● “Throughout the entire book, whenever George became curious, and acted upon that curiosity, something bad always followed. This presents the idea that curious minds always lead to trouble.”
George/ <i>Ivan</i> as a child/human or an animal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I find it interesting to compare George to a small child who is learning and discovering more about the world. He is curious about a lot of things such as birds and balloons because he has never seen a lot of these things before and he wants to know much more about them, just as children do when encountering new ideas and things.” ● “I kept thinking he [<i>Ivan</i>] was a person. Like when I was doing my chart, I had to stop myself from writing people.”
humans with/abusing power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I think that also connects to the fact that we've gotten away from our natural behavior a little too much, the fact that we [humans] think we're so different, that we can take animals and put them in cages for our own enjoyment.” ● “The humans in each story try to...make them [the animals] domestic when they're in fact wild animals.”
animal rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I dislike [<i>Curious George</i>] a lot more after reading <i>Ivan</i>. It makes it seem cool to go and disrupt an animal in their natural habitat when it isn't.” ● “I think that these actions hurt these animals. It makes them have to adjust to an environment that is new and unnatural, and they are expected to be obedient.”

Table 2

Summary of Student Responses Across Texts and Readings

Initial Reactions to <i>Curious George</i>	Reactions to Ivan	Reactions to <i>Curious George</i> After Ivan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Children will like the book:</i> “The text is fun and playful much like how children view the world. The pictures are very animated and bright and children really like to engage with pretty pictures.” ● <i>Appropriateness for children:</i> “The plot is essentially the kidnapping of a monkey who then calls the fire department and steals balloons. Not to mention the fact that George smokes a pipe, which is definitely not a good message for young readers.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Emotional response:</i> “At the end, when he’s like ‘she’s here, Stella,’ I whispered. ‘Ruby’s saved just like I promised.’ I was like...why is this so sad!...If I was a little bit more emotional this book would probably make me cry.” ● <i>Human-animal interactions:</i> “Do you think that animals can be sad depressed or jealous or do you think that it’s just like they’re just human emotions that we project on animals?” ● <i>Zoo vs. wild:</i> “Because we’re treating them in a way where they have no freedom... like Ivan for example, he was locked up and he was working for free [for] a crappy man, being mistreated.” ● <i>Appropriateness for children:</i> “There one passage where Mack was drunk?...and I [wondered] is this appropriate for a kid’s book that Mack shows up drunk at two in the morning?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Negative responses to zoos:</i> “The zoo seems like the sacred place in both stories where the animals are trying to get to in order to feel safe and free when in reality the zoos are known for not being great to animals or being that well kept, but these aspects of the zoo are not written about in children’s books.” ● <i>Animals held to human standards:</i> “It upset me when George was punished for not being able to fit into a place where he didn’t want to be.” ● <i>Appropriateness for children:</i> “I think children would still enjoy <i>Curious George</i> more because the situation [plotline] is more enjoyable and fun for them to read about. Kids would rather read about a crazy, adventurous monkey than a lonely, sad gorilla. I also still believe that although the situation [removing animals from their natural habitat] is morally wrong and kids shouldn’t be learning and reading about this, it is not enough for parents and teachers to stop reading the books to children.”

and views of George and Ivan as children or animals, which allowed us to further synthesize students' evolving reactions to the texts.

Findings

Students' initial reactions to *Curious George* centered on children's enjoyment of the playful storyline, but after reading the *Ivan* books and grappling with issues of humans' roles in wild animals' lives, students had many more negative responses to the resolution of *Curious George's* story. Throughout their readings, they focused on texts' appropriateness and appeal for children. Table 2 provides a summary of students' responses to the texts throughout the study to illustrate the evolution of their ideas. These themes will be taken up in the Findings, Discussion, and Considerations sections.

Initial Reactions to *Curious George*

When students first listened to *Curious George*, they mainly engaged in surface-level responses, thinking primarily about what children would like. Twelve out of nineteen students talked about their own enjoyment of *Curious George*, and seventeen stated how children would enjoy the book or how aspects of the book would be beneficial or appropriate for children. Students mentioned that the bright colors, short text, simple plot, and use of animals would appeal to children. For example, one student wrote, "The text is fun and playful much like how children view the world. The pictures are very animated and bright and children really like to engage with pretty pictures." Students also discussed how children could relate to George, his childlike qualities, and his curiosity. In addition, students thought about how children could learn from George and how mistakes have consequences.

When students questioned the text, most questioned the "adult" themes or the consequences of George's actions. Three students worried about sharing with children the illustration of George smoking a pipe and the roughness of putting George in jail for the false call to the fire department. Six students questioned the "messages" sent to children about George's actions—that George usually escaped instead of taking ownership of his mistakes, that children might want to emulate George's actions, or that children may conclude that curiosity or mistakes always have negative consequences.

In these cases, students were thinking about the direct impact of the text on children; however, four other students thought about larger social issues present in *Curious George*. One student felt it was not good to teach children that George should be taken from his homeland and put in a zoo, but ultimately felt that "children wouldn't think that deeply about a topic like that" so they would still enjoy the book. However, three students did not feel that *Curious George* taught lessons that they would want to share with children. One of them did not like the message that "animals should be locked up in a zoo for humans to enjoy, [because] it implies that the animals like the zoo too, which isn't always the case." This student also took exception to the fact that "curious minds always lead to trouble." The two remaining students focused on how *Curious George* makes it seem okay to take animals from their homes, with one calling this action "abusive" and "torture." While these students began to interrogate the ideology of the text in their first readings, most of the class did not question the larger social issues; instead they saw *Curious George* as a happy, imaginative book with colorful illustrations that children would enjoy.

Reactions to Ivan

When students read about Ivan, many of their responses were very emotional. To initiate the whole-class discussion, the instructor asked, “What did you think?” and several class members responded that “it was sad.” This echoes many comments made throughout the small-group discussions, where students confessed they had cried during their reading of the novel and gave voice to how upset they were with the treatment of both Ivan and Stella the elephant (a secondary character). These emotional reactions were reiterated in their written responses to the question of “Which *Ivan* text did you find more compelling and why?” Every student cited the novel as more compelling because the first-person narrative made them more invested in Ivan’s story as they connected to and empathized with the characters. The words “invested,” “connected,” and “empathize” came up frequently in their responses. Many also talked about how learning from the picturebook that it was a true story increased the emotional impact of Ivan’s plight during and/or after reading the novel. As one student commented, “When I know that something is real, it becomes ten times scarier or more sad.”

Students in all five discussion groups also commented about the fit of the novel and the picturebook within their understanding of the world of literature for children. In some groups, members talked about how having short chapters made it “good” for children or “easier for kids to read,” or how children would “have more focus in the picturebook because [it has] lots of pictures.” However, three groups wrestled with whether aspects of the novel were appropriate for children. Within these groups, two students focused on the caretaker’s use of alcohol; as one student wondered, is it “appropriate for a kids’ book that Mack shows up drunk at two in the morning?” A member of the

third group wrestled with whether the novel was even children’s literature because she did not think children could grapple with the idea that animals have feelings and that human actions affect them. However, her group members pushed back about the importance of teaching empathy from an early age. While the group members thought the novel’s reading level was too high for elementary students to read on their own, they thought discussions would help children understand the ideas in the novel. A fourth group talked about how children would realize that Ivan should not be in a mall, but adults would have stronger feelings about this than children when reading the book. Members of this group believed in the educative potential of the novel; one said, “This [the novel] could also teach kids, about animals in the mall, like what that animal goes through. Like animals are not just....” and another finished, “Yeah, it’s not just for our entertainment; it’s their life.” These comments then led to a discussion of the theme of humans versus nature.

Every group discussion mentioned human-animal interactions. Many groups admitted to feeling conflicted about the character Mack who bought Ivan as a little gorilla, raised him as a human child, and, when Ivan grew too big for the house, put in him in a cage as part of a circus exhibit in a mall. They saw how Mack viewed Ivan as part of his family but were upset by Mack’s neglect and cruel treatment of Ivan and the other animals in the shopping mall circus.

Both *Ivan* texts portray his poor living conditions in the mall, so in each, Ivan’s eventual move to the zoo is an improvement, and the zoo seems to be a positive place for him. In all groups, then, students grappled with their perspectives on animal life in the zoo or in the wild. In one group, a student talked about her initial dislike of zoos. But she began to question her own ideologies as she aligned with the

text's ideology: "I wanted them [Ivan and Ruby, a baby elephant under Stella's care] to get to the zoo, but I don't go to zoos. 'Cause it makes me sad, seeing animals, but then I'm like, oh maybe, maybe they don't mind it [living in the zoo]." The remaining four groups questioned the text's ideology about zoos to varying degrees. One student made a brief mention that she felt Ivan belongs in the wild but did not connect that to his life in the zoo. Another group's member was saddened by the story ending because "normally animals want to get out of the zoo, but they [the book's characters] want to be in the zoo so bad, which makes it so sad."

A third group questioned "why are we [humans] so superior?" with students arguing that humans should not "take animals and put them in cages for our own enjoyment" and that "animals aren't here for us to stare at." These students said they believed that if animals are hurt and cannot live in the wild, then the zoo may be fine, but that animals should not be bred to be in zoos.

They did not discuss the capture of animals to satisfy humans' desires—an aspect of *Curious George* and both *Ivan* books. Only one group discussed animal capture, with a student stating: "I wonder what it's like when they actually take them out of their wild life, like how they decide that" and another adding, "you're bringing them from something, straight from their life, like basically kidnapping." This group was extremely critical of zoos throughout their discussion, describing how sad animals look in zoos; one student remarked, "it could be compared to slavery in a way." Later in the discussion, members of this group talked about how the texts seem to portray the zoo as a paradise, and while zoo life was better than a cage in a mall, they

did not feel it was a great improvement since Ivan still was not free. When one member asked, "How do you feel about how Mack was with the animals...and they're going to a zoo that's like paradise?" another responded, "Kind of like George? Like *Curious George*?" While all groups compared the picturebook and novel about Ivan's experiences, this was the only group to spontaneously compare *Curious George* and *The One and Only Ivan* in their discussions.

Reactions to *Curious George After Ivan*

Immediately following the discussions of Ivan, the students listened to an in-class reading of *Curious George* again and wrote about their thoughts in light of the *Ivan* texts. Among their reactions were two major themes: that keeping wild animals in captivity is detrimental to the animal and that animals should not be held to human standards of behavior.

Nearly one-third of the students made comments regarding their negative feelings related to Ivan's and George's eventual homes in the zoo. They found it particularly troubling that George was removed from the jungle solely to relocate him to the zoo to be on exhibit. One student stated that after reading the *Ivan* texts, *Curious George* seemed like a "cruel book" because the story "makes it seem cool to disrupt an animal in their natural habitat when it isn't." Another reiterated this point by saying, "George is not in the environment he should be in." After engaging with the *Ivan* texts, students were less willing to accept that George is in a good place and should be happy; they no longer accepted the

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After addressing concerns about the appropriateness of removing George from the jungle for human entertainment, students thought about other ways his introduction into human society was detrimental. Their greatest complaint was that George is not human, yet he is forced against his will to adapt to human forms of behavior and expectations of appropriateness. Their written responses focused on George's punishment for phoning the fire department and the danger he encountered with balloons. One student pointed out that "humans were trying to turn George into a human...then punished him...for not knowing how to act human." Other students echoed this theme, stating, "He [George] was not brought up in this society and does not know any better," and "It upset me when George was punished for not being able to fit into a place where he didn't want to be." Reading and discussing the Ivan texts seemed to encourage students to examine their original ideas and opinions of *Curious George* and to engage with the story more critically.

Discussion

While reviewing student responses, the holistic code of "George/Ivan as a child/human or an animal" occurred frequently, and students' views on the characters changed as they read and discussed each text. This became the first theme in our analysis: grappling with human-animal distinctions. In addition, the holistic codes of "humans with power," "animal rights," and "human-animal interactions" revealed students engaging with ideas from postcolonial theory as they objected to the treatment of Ivan and George, likening it to slavery and colonization. Therefore, this became the second theme in our analysis: objecting to colonization.

Grappling with Human-Animal Distinctions

Throughout students' writings and discussions, they grappled with the extent to which Ivan and George were human or animal. Upon the first reading of *Curious George*, students often discussed George as if he were human, applying human characteristics and engaging with him as if he were merely a child drawn as a monkey. It seemed logical to students that George would get into trouble with the fire department because he was portrayed as young and curious, wanting to do everything the man in the yellow hat did. This parallel to a child's desire to be like a parent seemed to lead students to assume that because George was acting in ways they associated with children, he must be a child himself. Even when students questioned the text, many of their questions still portrayed George as a child or childlike. They discussed how children could relate to George's curiosity and his many mistakes, but they worried that children would be taught that being curious was something negative because George's curiosity always got him into trouble.

With Ivan, students also focused on Ivan's personality, calling him "quirky" and "cute," but they revealed a conflicted view of Ivan's humanness, making statements such as Ivan "totally grew as a pers- [pause for correction] character too" and "I kept thinking he was a person." Some of this conflict may be due to how Applegate (2012) wrote the novel *The One and Only Ivan*. Seeing the events through Ivan's eyes in first-person narration brings to light Ivan's humanity—his feelings of loneliness, his search for identity and place in the world, his frustration over his and his friends' treatment, and his loyalty. Yet, the content and style of Applegate's writing foregrounds Ivan's animal nature. Ivan speaks in short sentences grouped in very short entries/chapters and often describes the differences between gorillas and humans with word choices indicative of his gorilla perspective and lack of

familiarity with aspects of human life. At the beginning of the novel, Ivan narrates:

All day, I watch humans scurry from store to store. They pass their green paper, dry as old leaves and smelling of a thousand hands, back and forth and back again.

They hunt frantically, stalking, pushing, grumbling. Then they leave, clutching bags filled with things...but no matter how full the bags, they always come back for more.

Humans are clever indeed. They spin pink clouds you can eat. They build domains with flat waterfalls.

But they are lousy hunters. (p. 13)

In these short paragraphs, Ivan reveals his perspective as a gorilla, calling money “green paper” and comparing how humans purchase items to the actions of gorillas: “stalking, pushing, and grumbling” and concluding that humans “are lousy hunters.” Therefore, while the first-person narration makes Ivan seem more humanlike, the writing style and content reinforce his animal perspective, a combination that seemed to lead students to view Ivan as both human and animal.

Grappling with the roles and interactions of humans and animals during their discussion of the Ivan texts seemed to help students interrogate *Curious George* and their initial assumptions about George’s human nature. Students began making connections between how both Ivan and George were treated as humans even though they were wild animals. Ivan was dressed in clothing, fed at the family table, and encouraged to hold human babies, while George was expected to live in a house without making messes or causing problems. As one student stated, “the humans in each story try to personify [humanize]

the animals and make them domestic when they’re in fact wild animals.”

As students began to distinguish between human and animal, they found George’s and Ivan’s experiences problematic because the students were uncomfortable with the ideology that animals exist for humans’ amusement or benefit. While groups began to talk about this in their discussions of Ivan, their written responses connecting *Curious George* and the *Ivan* literature featured these sentiments even more. For example, one student wrote that George and Ivan were “taken for the enjoyment and pleasure of humans with no regard to how the animal is feeling,” and another commented that “Once they are no longer able to play the part of a human child, they are put in a cage/prison.” Students frequently observed that George was expected to act like a human, but was punished for doing so. They were angered that George goes to jail for phoning the fire department. Objections stemmed from the fact that George did not intend to cause trouble and that incarcerating him for replicating the man in the yellow hat’s actions punished George for doing what humans want him to do: become human by mimicking the actions of the human caring for him. When the humans in the book finally realized that George was an animal, they put him in a zoo. The idea that George needed to be in the zoo because living in human society did not work out for him blames George for not fitting in and not being human. As a student wrote, “The reason why he doesn’t fit in is because it is not his home; he was not brought up in ... society so he does not know any better.” In comparing the texts, students recognized that Ivan was an animal. Consequently, they began to see George as an animal; they also began to question how humans reacted to both Ivan’s and George’s behaviors—namely by placing them in human-sanctioned enclosures.

Objecting to Colonization

On the surface, life in the zoo appears to be a good thing both for Ivan and George. Prior to being taken to the zoo, Ivan was trapped in a tiny cell in a shopping mall without the company of other gorillas or access to the outdoors. George fell overboard a ship, escaped from jail, and was carried away by helium balloons. In both stories, the zoo represents a safe, positive place where animals can live and play, offering respite from peril. The explicit message in *Curious George's* closing illustrations and final lines—“and at last, away they went to the ZOO! What a nice place for George to live!” (Rey, 1969, pp. 52, 54)—suggests that zoos are the most appropriate places for wild animals because there they will be with others of their species, taken care of by humans, happy and safe. Because the goal in both the Ivan novel and picturebook is to get Ivan out of his cage and into the zoo, the zoo is imbued with positive feelings as a satisfying resolution.

However, in their discussions of and written responses to both Ivan texts, students began to question whether it was acceptable to place these animals in zoos, given they had no need or desire to leave the jungle in the first place. Members of one discussion group brought their developing critical feelings of *Curious George* to their reading of Ivan. They discussed how the Ivan books also portray the zoo as “like paradise” and said “Kind of like George? Like Curious George? It’s like, oh, I’m in the zoo now, I’m free. But it’s not.” In this way, this group began to interrogate both texts.

As students discussed the caging of George and Ivan, they focused on how both animals were acculturated into human society. They were taken from the

jungle, a place their captors deemed savage, and were given human clothing to wear, fed human diets, and brought to live in human dwellings—in short, both Ivan and George undergo forced acculturation, in a sense making them the colonized and humans the colonizers. One student wrote, “I think that these actions hurt these animals. It makes them have to adjust to an environment that is new and unnatural, and they are expected to be obedient.” Of particular importance is the statement that the actions of the colonizers *make* the animals adjust. It is not Ivan’s or George’s choice to leave their natural habitat. When these wild animals do not adjust well to the expectations of humans, they are punished for their perceived shortcomings in the form of incarceration in jails, cages, and zoos.

“Many students commented that by not providing George’s thoughts, the human viewpoint dominated and framed him as merely curious, making the book more lighthearted...”

While students never used the term “colonization” to describe the events of books in our text set, the ideas they grapple with are reminiscent of colonizer-colonized paradigm in postcolonial theory (Bradford, 2007; Tyson, 2014). Class

discussions often centered around the idea that there is a powerful entity who has answers and knowledge and needs to teach or improve others’ lives. The man in the yellow hat fills this role for George as Mack does for Ivan. Students were uncomfortable with the implicit ideology that animals could not function happily without human influence. One wrote, “The Zoo seems good to them [George and Ivan] in juxtaposition to the human world, but neither George nor Ivan should have been taken from his original home in the jungle in the first place.” Therefore, the zoo was better than the dangers and unfairness of the human world, but it was not perfect. Even for Ivan there was an adjustment period when he moved between the shopping mall and the zoo during which he had to

learn how to live in his new surroundings and interact with the other gorillas at the zoo. One response summed up the feelings of other members of the class: “I dislike [*Curious George*] a lot more after reading Ivan. It makes it seem cool to go and disrupt an animal in their natural habitat when it isn’t.” Going further, students wrote and talked about what life would have been like for Ivan and George if they had never encountered and been captured by humans. They discussed the ways in which Ivan’s life in the zoo is still not as fulfilling as a life left alone in the jungle might have been. In these ways, students pushed back against the implicit ideology of human domination and colonization.

Students also pushed back against the colonization of perspectives. While both books were written by humans, the novel *The One and Only Ivan* is narrated in Ivan’s voice. Many students commented that by not providing George’s thoughts, the human viewpoint dominated and framed him as merely curious, making the book more lighthearted. One student wrote, “Ivan’s character had more depth and gave a more realistic perspective than Curious George. George was portrayed through human eyes, toning down how inhumane taking him from the wild may have actually been.”

The Third Space

By reading *Curious George* and the Ivan books as a text set, this group of students seemed to move away from their First Space childhood experiences with *Curious George* and from their Second Space class-focused encounters with the *Ivan* books to a Third Space in which they could interrogate both texts. In this space, students began to question the happy tone in *Curious George* and the positive depiction of the zoo for George and Ivan. They began to think about how perspective affects the ways in which authors portray characters and the ways readers

internalize them. By placing these texts in dialogue with each other in a Third Space, students noted how humans colonized the books’ perspectives, which marginalized other points of view—an essential tenet of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, Sluys, & Henkin, 2002). In this Third Space, students were able to achieve some ideological distance from the texts and compare/contrast them to engage in critical literacy.

Given the initial positive outcomes for our students’ developing critical literacy skills, as teacher educators, we want to continue to offer text sets for our students and be thoughtful and purposeful in not only how we pair texts, but also how we guide the discussions and students’ interactions with texts to foster critical literacy. However, there are some considerations (described below) that may influence the effectiveness of using text sets to develop critical literacy.

Considerations

While all groups compared the *Ivan* novel and picturebook and thought about the ways in which each *Ivan* text influenced their engagement with and understanding of the storyline, only one group mentioned *Curious George* during their discussion of the Ivan texts prior to the instructor reintroducing it. This group questioned both texts’ portrayals of the zoo as a “paradise.” It is possible that when other groups questioned the zoo’s status as a “home” for Ivan, they thought of *Curious George* (but did not say it); however, when explicitly tasked with thinking about *Curious George* in light of the Ivan texts, students read both texts, but especially *Curious George*, more critically. It seemed that juxtaposing texts and drawing explicit references to them helped students enter a Third Space, which provided a measure of ideological distance so that they could interrogate the underlying issues and assumptions of both texts.

Discussion was also an important part of this interrogation, given that it was through discussion that students brought issues of human-animal interactions and colonization to the forefront. All five small groups grappled with these ideas in their conversations around the Ivan texts, which laid the groundwork for their written responses where they continued to consider these issues; as a result, many of their views of *Curious George* greatly changed. The importance of discussion has been reiterated in Souto-Manning's (2009) work, where the first graders in her study could not read the text sets critically without discussion. Consistent with social theories of learning and literacy (of which Third Space is a part), discussion is a mediational tool helping participants use current understandings as a springboard to new, deeper, different, and/or more developed understandings (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

In addition, background knowledge has been cited as a consideration when developing critical literacy. In Apol et al.'s (2002) study of students' struggles engaging in critical literacy using a World War II text set, they hypothesized that unfamiliarity, complexity, and the controversial nature of U.S.-Japan relations during World War II inhibited students' responses. This is both similar to and different from what we imagine to be the experiences of our students. While animal rights can be a controversial topic, it is less so than issues related to the dropping of the atomic bomb, where the corresponding rhetoric is tied to what it means to be an American, and U.S. history books either omit this information or provide a one-sided presentation. The students in our study likely had more background knowledge about animals and animal rights, and there was less at stake for them to critically analyze how humans and animals interact. We did not measure students' feelings about animal rights in a pre-assessment because we did not want to lead students to read *Curious George* in a particular way. However, it would be interesting to

know if students who were more prone to thinking about animal rights were more critical of *Curious George* and the Ivan books from the outset.

Emotions and affect may also play a role in students' changes in attitudes and engagement in critical literacy. In McNair's (2003) study, when students had nostalgic and positive emotional attachments to a text, they seemed to struggle in critiquing it. In our study, students initially exhibited these behaviors with their first reading of *Curious George*, but the juxtaposition with the Ivan texts seems to have helped many students move past their initial nostalgia and resistance to critique. As well, emotional attachments of a different sort may, in fact, help spur critical readings. For example, throughout their conversations and writings, students talked about their emotional investment in Ivan's story, frequently mentioning how sad Ivan's situation made them, how mad they were at Mack's treatment of the animals, and how hearing Ivan's "voice" in the novel made them more empathetic. That emotional investment—which had less to do with nostalgia and more to do with empathy—may have made the ideologies of human dominance over the animal world more salient, providing support for their engagement in critical literacy. It may have aided their abilities to take various positions and to identify how the ways humans framed human-animal interactions marginalized animals' perspectives. At the same time, students' sympathies with Ivan may have also made it more difficult for them to uncover the implicit ideology of those books' positive framing of the zoo because, as they said, they were "rooting" for him to leave the cage in the mall and were happy at the positive resolution of the zoo. Investigating the role of affect in developing critical literacy has been under-researched (Anwaruddin, 2016) and is important for this and future studies.

Finally, by helping these students as prospective teachers develop critical literacy, the goals are not only that they will be more informed about the texts they encounter and use in their future classrooms, but also that they can help their future students develop critical literacy. Because our goals for the course are more literary than pedagogical, and because our students are too early in their programs to have experience as “teachers” of children, we did not ask our students about how they would use these books in their future classrooms. However, in their written responses viewing *Curious George* in light of the *Ivan* texts, multiple students talked about how children might react to the books. Many wrote how *Curious George* would still be “fun,” “entertaining,” and “interesting” for children, and one thought “kids would rather read about a crazy, adventurous monkey than a lonely, sad gorilla.” Another wrote that while she “can understand the more mature meanings to them [the books], that does not necessarily mean that the children will. It is very likely that they will not,” thereby dismissing children’s ability to engage in critical literacy. Thus, while juxtaposing texts and helping these prospective teachers enter a Third Space may be an initial step in critical literacy development, prospective teachers need multiple exposures and repeated practice engaging in critical literacy to build their own skills. In addition, they need to realize that children—even very young children—can engage in these practices too. Observing or participating in situations where children engage in critical literacy may aid that process.

Conclusions

This study offers promising results that if educators thoughtfully juxtapose texts and explicitly help readers make connections across them, readers may enter a Third Space of intertextual interrogation and begin to engage in critical literacy. However, socially-constructed understandings and misunderstandings, the controversial nature of some topics, varying degrees of background knowledge, and emotions such as nostalgia and/or empathy may affect how readers critically interact with these texts in the Third Space.

The work we have been doing with our students is a first step toward making them more active, involved, and thoughtful readers, with the goal of supporting not only their developing skills in critical literacy, but also the ways they may one day engage their future students in this important and transformative work. As readers of all ages and skill levels learn to distance themselves from their unexamined assumptions and personal ideologies in order to critically evaluate the messages (and their implications) they encounter in texts, they become more active, thoughtful consumers not only of literature, but also of news, speeches, online materials, and the like. Only by developing these abilities in ourselves as teachers and teacher educators can we teach them to students of all ages in an attempt to develop critical literacy and to create a more thoughtful, just, and inclusive society.

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