# Chapter 3 Choosing Books and Reading Critically

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SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, ISBN: 9781452212906

Many children are first introduced to reading and writing through stories that are read aloud to them by parents, teachers, caregivers, and others. It is believed that reading aloud to a child even 15 minutes a day makes a huge difference in that child later being able to read and write in school. Although reading stories aloud is largely a Western concept, the idea that more exposure to language and communication increases children's vocabulary has been proven perhaps all over the world. Even children who may not be exposed to reading aloud in the traditional sense but are exposed to oral tales, finger-plays, rhymes, and song begin to show their grasp of language. In fact, in this world of billboards, advertisements, televisions, the World Wide Web, and so on, one could argue that it is actually hard to get away from print in some form or other. So why is there the necessity to read aloud to a child? Why should parents and caregivers read to children? And what has prompted the large demand for children's books, especially early childhood products to encourage reading? The answer, simply, is that reading aloud is the single most effective way to engage and communicate with a child while at the same time teaching the child the conventions of printed language and communication. However, even in this world where one would have to try very hard to get away from print, a 2004 research report by the National Endowment for the Arts noted that there is a great decline in reading, that overall average reading scores continue to worsen especially among teenagers and young men. They also cautioned that this has serious civic, social, and economic implications (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004). In light of this, it has become even more imperative to teach children not only how to read, but to read critically, to engage with the world in which they live.

This chapter goes further than just touching upon the traditional read-aloud strategies such as predicting, plot recognition, and so on. This chapter concentrates on the concept of choosing critical books to read aloud in the belief that this is a

powerful strategy that can be used throughout one's school years and beyond, to engage in and with connecting the curriculum to current events and students' lives.

## CHOOSING CRITICAL CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The role of particularly one kind of lesson that almost always uses a children's book stands foremost in language arts and literacy or reading classes: the read-aloud. A read-aloud is simply the reading of any book aloud to children, usually in an elementary or a primary classroom or to a group of children, followed by specific activities. In the average classroom, the primary purpose of a read-aloud is to help students learn vocabulary aspects of plot, make predictions, answer questions related to the story, and so on. Rather than using a read-aloud story only to teach reading strategies, it may also be used to expose children and young adults to rich and diverse literature. More importantly, reading aloud may be used to elicit critical dialogue about the story's social topic as a means to get children and young adults thinking on a deeper level about their own role in society and the responsibilities that go with it. In keeping with the theme of this book, this chapter emphasizes critical literacy and shows how multicultural children's literature, when used suitably, through read-alouds, can play an important role in creating a student and youth force of critical thinkers.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, there are more than 10,000 children's trade books published each year, and that number almost doubled to 17,500 in 2008 (Kiefer, 2010), all of which come under the broad category of children's literature. To weed out and choose meaningful and authentic children's books becomes a difficult task, given the variety and volume of books. Further, when choosing books, it is important to keep in mind the goals and objectives of the lesson. Two related principles on choosing books help immensely:

1. *Wide Audience Appeal:* Books that have wide audience appeal are those that can reach out to a wide variety of audiences in terms of comprehension and situations. Further, such books can be read and enjoyed equally by children of a wide age range, providing them with aspects to connect with at their comprehension levels and at their developmental level. In other words, there is something for everyone in these books. Although most multicultural children's books, when written by a master author, provide these opportunities, some books stand out more than the rest. In the following paragraphs more details are provided.

2. *Possibility for Critical Analysis:* Critical analysis is not simply critiquing a book and its content; rather, critical analysis may be understood as getting to

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critical aspects of the content of the story and connecting it to real life and the curriculum to question, discuss, analyze, make inferences, and so on. Particularly, these books may offer revealing insights, change attitudes, and show diverse perspectives.

These principles are not new for a critical literacy curriculum; rather, here they are redefined in relation to reading aloud in a way to incorporate what reading educators have all along said are successful strategies in terms of teaching reading to students. A book for a read-aloud picked with these two principles is sure to elicit deeper conversations and comprehension from students. The following are specific things to look for when choosing books that have wide audience appeal and possibilities for critical analysis:

*Language use:*

- Simple and vivid, with word choices evoking visual aspects
- Brevity of words to evoke depth of meaning rather than long descriptions
- May have metaphorical, rhythmic, onomatopoeic, or symbolic language (but not required)
- May use a variety of dialects, ways of speaking, mannerisms, and/or code-switch to be culturally authentic

*Illustrations (if any):*

- Complement the text to create an equal union between text and illustrations
- Have vivid colors or colors that depict the mood, setting, emotional and cultural content of the text or story line
- Are multilayered and multidimensional to provide wide depth of meaning
- Are culturally authentic in their art form

*Content:*

- Culturally relevant and provides culturally and historically authentic information (if any)
- Connects to a current event, real-life incident, event, or fact
- Well researched, informative, and provides a new perspective
- Provides openings for questions, queries, wonderings, and "what ifs"

There are numerous examples of books that have wide audience appeal and possibilities of critical analysis. Some favorites are *Honey Baby Sugar Child,* a read-aloud book for preschool and kindergarten. With beautiful colors and realistic

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action pictures, the book shows a mother and her baby playing throughout the day. The words depict the African American language as the mother says, "I wanna kiss ya, squeeze ya till the sugar's gone. . . . Child I want to eat you up." Other books that show wonderful language use include Pat Mora's *Confetti Poems for Children* (1992) and *Agua, Agua, Agua* (1994). *Henry's Freedom Box* (2007), by Ellen Levine, is based on a true story first retold in an 1872 publication about the Underground Railroad. Excellently illustrated by Kadir Nelson, the book shows the beauty, dignity, and integrity of the Black people: "Do you see those leaves blowing in the wind? They are torn from the trees like slave children are torn from their families," says Henry's mother in the story. The same leaf motif is used by Allen Say in *Grandfather's Journey* (2008) to talk about the devastation of World War II: "Our lives were "scattered . . . like leaves in a storm."

Mildred D. Taylor's part autobiographical stories about the Logan family who owns some land in the early 1930s are all written with vivid language that puts us instantly into the times in which they were written. These short chapter books are perfect for reading aloud to a primary or elementary class. Most are less than 60 pages long. *Song of the Trees, The Friendship, Mississippi Bridge, The Well, The Gold Cadillac,* and others are told through the eyes of the Logan children, Cassie and her brothers Stacey, Little Man, and Christopher-John. These stories show the injustices in the lives of pre–civil rights African American families.

*Clara Caterpillar* tells the story of Clara, a caterpillar, and her friends, as they go from caterpillar to cocoon to butterfly. Clara turns into a plain cabbage butterfly while Connie turns into a beautiful red butterfly. As Connie shows off her colors, a bird chases her to eat her till Clara distracts the bird and then camouflages herself so that the bird loses interest. Vibrant colors and the use of many words starting with the letter *c* give us a wonderful text to read aloud for primary age children. Other books for this age group include Leo Lionni's *Frederick, Swimmy,* and *Little Blue and Little Yellow*. More examples of books that have wide audience appeal and possibilities for critical analysis are given in the annotated bibliography at the end of this chapter. A read-aloud with a book chosen along these lines makes for a deeper reading engagement for students.

## The Traditional Read-Aloud

In the traditional classroom, a read-aloud is generally done for one of two purposes: to teach specific reading lessons and for entertainment or transition times. The traditional classroom read-aloud usually follows a pattern such as this:

- The teacher picks a book to read, usually a picture book and usually to an elementary or younger age class.

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- The teacher does a "picture walk" or a similar version of this by asking questions for "predictions," such as, "What do you think this book is about?" "Can you tell me what is going on in the story by looking at the pictures?"
- The teacher may also choose and prepare "difficult" words from the book ahead of time and put them on a "vocabulary" list for students to learn.
- The teacher then reads the book aloud, stopping at various points to ask questions. These questions are mainly to see if the students are understanding the story, comprehending the plot line, are able to recall incidents from the story, and so on.
- If this is a preprimary class, then the read-aloud is mainly used for teaching phonemic awareness and high frequency words, letter recognition, sentence pattern, and so on.
- Once the book has been read aloud, another book is chosen for a different lesson.

Rarely are children in middle or high school read aloud to and rarely are children's books used abundantly in these age groups. Although the aforementioned outline works well, in order to fully make use of the wealth of multicultural children's literature available to us today, methods that are more interactive and based on reader-response theories may be used for a critical read-aloud format. However, before describing a critical read-aloud format, it is important to describe and explain the reader-response theory on which it is based, in the following paragraphs.

## Reader Response

Foremost amongst reader-response theories is Louise Rosenblatt's *transactional theory,* which describes the relationship between a reader and a text. Long before people began thinking about the reader having a stake in the reading process, Rosenblatt formed and described her transactional theory in her work, *Literature as Exploration,* published in 1938, later republished in 1968, 1976, 1983, and most recently in 1995 (Karolides, 2005). Although Rosenblatt does not consider her transactional theory a part of reader-response theories, this work has been the foundation for many other reader-response theories that flourished later in the 20th century (Karolides, 2005). Simply put, Rosenblatt's transactional theory is based on the belief that "meaning is being built up through the back-and-forth relationship between reader and text during a reading event" (Karolides, 2005, p. xix). At a time (1930s) when objective and impersonal approaches to science were the norm, Rosenblatt discovered that her students' readings of literature and their discussions were built on their personal interchanges with the text.

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In other words, when people read and responded to texts, they brought in their life experiences, assumptions about the world, and their cultural orientations. This observation was the key factor in forming her transactional theory.

In this theory, Dr. Rosenblatt explains that there are two kinds of transactions that take place when we read a text: *Efferent* and *Aesthetic.* Both of these have to do with the way we read and comprehend the text and "the kind of meaning produced," whatever that text may be (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. xxv). Efferent reading is when we read for informative purposes only, such as instruction labels, directions, "how to" manuals, and so on. In such a reading, the emphasis is on the end result, what we can understand or make meaning of for a particular purpose. We carry forward the meaning we gain from an efferent reading into our actions by following what the text tells us to do, as efferent in Latin means to "carry away" (Rosenblatt, 2005). In such readings, therefore, we do not invest any emotion, personal feelings, or personal preferences; rather, we look for the "actions to perform after the reading ends" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. xxvi). In other words, an efferent reading happens when we are looking for facts and ideas that we may use for a particular purpose.

Aesthetic reading, however, is diametrically opposite to efferent reading and is highly personal and private. It is a "lived through" experience that happens during the *process* of reading rather than at the end. Aesthetic reading is a transaction between the reader and the text that happens in the duration of the reading and involves "the images, the sensations, the feelings, the changing moods . . . and attitudes surrounding it" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. xxvi). In such a reading transaction, the end result is a "poem" that is produced between the reader and the text. This "poem" may be interpreted as the "meaning gleaned" or the "experience of" the reader.

Dr. Rosenblatt further puts these two ways of reading on a continuum that she calls the transactional theory, mentioned earlier. In her transactional theory, efferent and aesthetic are on opposite ends of the same pole, which may be drawn as a straight line. All reading may be placed on this line or continuum, and depending on what kind of transaction the reading experience gives us, we can place it on this continuum. For example, we may read the newspaper in the morning to know about what is happening in the world. In the process of reading the newspaper, we unconsciously make selections on what we engage personally with and what we read for information. Perhaps a news item touches us more deeply than another, or perhaps we learn something we had never heard of before from another news item; in other words, we transact differently with different news items, and during our reading, we may move between aesthetic and efferent reading on the same continuum. This transactional theory with its efferent and aesthetic continuum explains what happens in the process of any reading event, especially between the reader and the text.

In terms of teaching reading in the classroom, if the transaction can become one that is closer to an aesthetic reading, children's responses and engagement with the text become more involved, personal, and critical.

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## READING ALOUD AND TRANSACTIONAL THEORY

In most classroom situations, especially given the push for meeting the standards, time constraints, and accountability, teachers are simply pushed to do efferent transactions rather than strive for an aesthetic transaction. Even 75 years after Dr. Rosenblatt pioneered the transactional theory, many classrooms are still places where students are expected to learn mainly facts and information through reading various texts, rather than become involved in constructing a collaborative curriculum. The traditional read-aloud follows such a curriculum, where students are expected to learn and answer questions about the story or literature selection they read. In fact, Dr. Rosenblatt (2005) herself put it this way:

> The tendency in the teaching of literature has been to turn the student's attention away from the actual experience, and to focus on presenting a "correct," traditional interpretation, and on knowledge about technical devices or biographical or historical background. (p. xxvii)

Similarly, after reading a literature selection, students doing a traditional read-aloud are usually expected to answer specific questions regarding the story's facts rather than reflect on the feelings produced by the story and how those feelings and interpretations affect their attitudes about the story in relation to their worlds. In fact, it may be said that the importance of Rosenblatt's transactional theory lies in its basic principle of reflective practices, that of paying attention to and encouraging students to take deeper and more critical stances in their readings of all school texts and materials.

### The Critical Read-Aloud

Based on Dr. Rosenblatt's transactional theory and her philosophy of encouraging students to take more critical stances in their readings of school materials, a "critical read-aloud" may be fashioned using available multicultural children's literature. In a critical read-aloud, books are chosen using the two criteria mentioned in the beginning of this chapter: books with wide audience appeal and possibilities for critical analysis. Further, teachers could also consider the following in choosing books:

- Pick books that connect with the current topic in the classroom and have relevance to the students in the classroom.
- Read the book several times before reading it aloud to the classroom, to
  - — Find a specific angle or specific topic that will hook the interest of students in the class. This may be a current event, a fact, a picture, a question, or anything that the students and the teacher could discuss before the read-aloud.

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- Set the book or story in a larger context than just the classroom. As mentioned here, finding an angle to hook students allows students to anticipate what the story is going to be about while also seeing how the story fits with the class curriculum, what they are learning and wondering about, and why it is important to learn about this topic. A simple "I wonder what . . . " sets the context for the read-aloud. This also allows students to participate by doing their own wonderings, a way to meet the requirements of "predicting" without making it mundane.
- Set the time and pace, and decide where to pause, put emphasis, ask questions, stop for discussion, and so on.
- Note down major points of the story that can be used for further discussion or for student response activities.

- Decide what responses will be reasonable to ask of students during and after the read-aloud (this depends on age, development level, and ability).
- Strive for responses that help students gain a more aesthetic reading of the book rather than for information or efferent purposes only.
- Prepare open-ended questions that help students to
  - *Connect* with the story (whole story, parts, with a character, etc.)
  - *Discuss* among themselves (whole class or small groups)
  - Understand what they *felt* about the story (Was it sad, happy, etc.) and why
  - *Facilitate intertextual connections* (Do they know of similar stories in their real lives or in what they have read or heard before?)
  - *Develop deeper understandings* of the story (Why do you think an incident happened?)
  - *Provide information* about the author, illustrator, time period, and setting
  - *Critique the story:* Critique does not mean only ripping it apart; it also means getting at critical points in the story that may be difficult to understand. It means helping students understand why something happened the way it did. It means helping students question "either-or" theories or cut-and-dried facts (e.g., Why did the Indians have to sign the treaty and give up their lands? Were all the Indians bad? Were all the settlers bad? What really happened when Columbus "discovered" America?).

As many educators and teachers are aware, open-ended questions are not just questions that don't have a one-word answer or a yes or no answer; rather, they are questions that help students begin thinking about the topic at hand. In terms of doing a critical read-aloud, questioning is an essential process in furthering students' engagement with authentic literature. Although much has been written about questioning and the process and motives of asking questions, it would be useful to go through some techniques of questioning.

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## QUESTIONING

In a critical approach to learning, students are recognized as contributing members of the curriculum, constructing and shaping it. Empowering students with the ability to construct their curriculum requires that teachers provide the basis for students to build that knowledge through opportunities and "openings" in the curriculum. Questioning is at the core of such a curriculum because through asking productive questions, students are empowered into action. However, asking productive questions is a skill that needs to be constantly honed. Morgan and Saxton (1994) said that "effective teaching depends primarily upon the teacher's skill in being able to ask questions which generate different kinds of learning" (p. 3).

In a traditional read-aloud, the teacher questions students so they can assess if the students are able to comprehend the story. So in a picture walk, students may be asked, "What do you think this book is about?" This activates prior knowledge or tells the teacher how much the students already know about the topic or book. However, rephrasing the same question with a context will help assess various other areas over and above simply activating prior knowledge. For example, say the book being read aloud is *Grandfather's Journey,* by Allen Say, and the teacher asks students, "What do you think this book is about?" Students may answer, "about a grandfather's journey," or something close to that. As can be seen, the question did not invite a longer or more in-depth answer than that. Rather, the teacher might set the context by opening a short discussion on journeys, perhaps asking something like, "Do any of you know anyone who has come from a different country? Have they told you their story?" or "I wonder why people leave their countries to go settle in another country?" After a brief discussion in which students will be able to make various connections to journeys, particularly those of an immigrant, their answer to "What do you think this book is about?" will be more involved. They will now know that this book may be about a grandfather's journey from one country to another. This kind of activation of prior knowledge is more rounded in that it is helping students do multiple learning activities at the same time. The discussion sets the context in helping them do the following:

- *Comprehend* what they are going to read about
- *Anticipate* what may happen in the story, thereby *involving* them
- Make *intertextual* connections with what happens in the story because they have heard others in the class discuss people they knew who may have left their country
- *Synthesize* what is being read to them because they have a context to base it on
- *Analyze* what is happening because the earlier discussion set the foundation for their further understanding of the story

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- Be *empowered* as the teacher began a question with, "I wonder . . . " showing them that she may not have all the answers
- *Apply* what they know from the discussion and from the read-aloud to set the stage for further learning and wonderings (Morgan & Saxton, 1994)

As can be seen, it is crucial to word the open-ended question in a way that invites students to participate fully in the read-aloud. A useful strategy in wording the question is to ask oneself the following: "What learning principle do I want my students to gain from their answers to this question?" So for example, when the read-aloud calls for students to be able to "predict," the teacher could ask herself or himself this: "What do I really want them to learn when I ask them to predict?" Does the teacher want to see simply if the students can anticipate or guess? Or is it something deeper? Does the teacher want to know if the students are capable of following visual cues in the story to anticipate what may come next? If this is the case, then rephrasing with a series of questions to lead the students up to the answer may be more useful. So rather than asking, "What do you think will happen next?" one could say the following: "Can you think of another story that was similar to this one? What does this picture tell you? I wonder if we could guess what may happen by looking at the picture." In other words, asking ourselves, "What learning principle do I want my students to gain from their answers to this question?" will help teachers analyze what category or kind of information they are looking for when they phrase a question. That is, what is the function of asking a particular question?

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## Functions of Questioning

Morgan and Saxton (1994) came up with some very useful categories or kinds of questions. Breaking down questioning techniques by these functions helps us as teachers to understand why we may ask a certain question. In other words, it helps us in the process of understanding what learning principles we want our students to gain by the questions we ask. Making bare these processes and functions clarifies for us teachers the language and procedures to use not only in critical read-alouds but in most lessons that we strive to teach in classrooms. As Morgan and Saxton did such a fantastic job of enumerating and describing this methodology, most of what follows is reproduced and adapted directly from Chapter 5 of *Asking Better Questions* by Morgan and Saxton, originally published in 1994 (a second edition was published in 2006). They classify questions by the function or purpose that they serve when asked. Broadly they classified the following three categories:

- Questions which elicit Information
- Questions which shape Understanding
- Questions which press for Reflection

Rather than classify questions by type, which may limit student participation because the *type* of question may be teacher directed—it may be factual or evaluative—Morgan and Saxton classify questions by what the question is *intended to do*. So they ask, "What do I want this question to *do*?" (1994, p. 41, emphasis in original), which may be a natural shadow to the question that is asked earlier: "What learning principle do I want my students to gain from their answers to this question?"

### *Elicit Information*

Questions that elicit information can further be classified by the function that they serve:

- *Function:* To Establish Rules
  - — Rules of behavior (in a classroom, in the playground, during a read–aloud, etc.). For example: "What do we need to remember when we are listening to a story?"
  - — Develop discussion skills/take responsibility/give responsibility (to make new rules, to establish parameters, to judge fairness, etc.): For example, "What do we do when we have a problem?"
  - — Checking to see if everyone is on the same page/checking for comprehension/checking to see if students are attentive, and so forth. For example: "Did everyone understand what we are going to do now?"
- *Function:* To Establish Procedure
  - — Go over procedure, for order, to form groups, to set productive ways for work, and so on. For example: "What do we do first before we go out to play?" "What do we do to form a group?" "How shall we form this group?"
  - — Develop organization of time, space, or method of work. For example: "Do we have enough information to come to a conclusion?" "What more do we need to know and how do we go about finding out?"
  - — To stimulate research and establish engagement in the material. For example: "Who in real life can give us this information?" "What do we need to know to move on?" "What would happen if . . . ?"
- *Function:* To Establish Control/Group Discipline
  - — To help students work independently and efficiently. For example: "How shall we arrange the classroom?" "Who will be responsible for notes?" "Who will keep time?"
  - — To unify class to help students feel like a community/togetherness. For example: "Are we all agreed that . . . ?" "Are we ready to move on now?" "Did everyone understand?" "Does anyone have any other questions or comments or anything to add?"

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- *Function:* To Focus on Recall of Facts
  - Establish curricular foundation, go over what has been learned, establish facts, and so on. For example: "Could someone summarize the plot?" "Could we recall what happened so far in the story?" "What happened to this person?"
- *Function:* To Supply Information and/or Suggest Implications
  - Prepare students to deal with a possible challenge, pose a possible challenge to help them focus attention or think of implications. For example: "What are we prepared to give up if we choose to do this?" "Did the Indian Tribes in . . . really understand the treaty they were signing?" "What may happen if no one recycles?"
- *Function:* To Reveal Experience
  - To discover what students are bringing into the classroom. For example: "Can you think of a time when you may have been in the same situation?" "Has there been a time when you couldn't/were not allowed to . . . ? What did you experience?"

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### *Shape Understanding*

Questions that shape understanding can also be further broken down by the function that they serve.

- *Function:* To Make Connections

  To require students to use what they know and apply it to the material at hand; to bring students today into a relationship with the past and/or future. (Morgan & Saxton, 1994, p. 45)

  - *Personal Connections*. For example: "Has anyone had a similar experience?"
  - *Intertextual Connections*. For example: "How is this similar to something you have heard/read/seen/or been told about?"
  - *Cultural Connections*. For example: "How would it change your lives if . . . ?"
- *Function:* To Reposition (to help students rethink, restate, or reposition a situation so that they are able to understand the depth or concept more accurately). For example: "What does the author really mean when he/she states . . . ?" "Do you really think this person means what is said here?" "What would you do if . . . ?"
- *Function:* To Promote Understanding From Multiple Perspectives (to help students develop their own attitudes, to think through and decode for

themselves, to view an area of study from multiple perspectives and understandings). For example: "Is it okay to want revenge?" "What does war really do?" "Who are the victims of war?" "If it were happening in your own backyard, would you feel differently?" or "Is it possible to live in an area of conflict and belong to no side?" (Morgan & Saxton, 1994, p. 47)

- *Function:* To Enhance Inference and Interpretation, Focus on Underlying Meaning Making (to help students infer from, conclude or deduce, probe for deeper comprehension, especially from written materials that they will use to think). For example: "What is this paragraph really saying?" "What does the statement/situation really tell you about . . . ?" "How will you explain . . . ?" "What is the implication of this on that?"

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### Press for Reflection

Questions that press for reflection are crucial to a critical literacy curriculum as this is the part where teachers can really lead students into critical thinking. Questions that press for reflection function in the following ways:

- *Function:* To Develop Supposition or Hypothesis (to help students think creatively and laterally rather than literally). For example: "I wonder what would happen if Snow White suddenly discovered that her real mother was the witch and not her stepmother?" or "What would you do if you woke up and found that you had become the opposite gender?" or "What if the homeless person in your neighborhood turns out to be the Nobel prize winner?" These are questions that may throw one off guard, thereby making students think creatively to develop a supposition or a hypothesis.
- *Function:* To Focus on Personal Feelings (Usually questions that press for reflection focus on personal feelings, such as "Which character in . . . was your favorite or did you like this book or story?" may be asked. However, the importance in focusing on personal feelings questions is to give students practice in expressing and sharing these feelings in verbal or written ways.) For example: "Why is it that you sometimes feel homesick even when you are at home?" (Morgan & Saxton, 1994, p. 49). "What is home to you?" or "What might be your concerns . . . ?"
- *Function:* To Develop Critical Assessment/Value Judgments (These questions help to guide students' thinking to examine and recognize their own viewpoints, biases, feelings, and thinking. The questions are often designed and worded to instigate and stimulate controversy in order to get students thinking.) For example: "If we woke up one fine day and found that we are no longer a democracy, what would we do?" "Can we justify children working to earn a living?" "Does it really matter if we recycle or not?" "Where would

you place value? Or "What would be priority—eradicating hunger in the world or poverty in the United States?"

Morgan and Saxton (1994) also reminded us that these questions and their functions are not hierarchical and do not represent any kind of taxonomy. In other words, during a lesson, a teacher may shift easily between these three categories, using questions from any of the functions, and lead according to the objectives of the lesson: The focus should always be on the needs of the students and "what you want the question *to do*" (p. 51). This classification of questions, according to these two educators, follows the common practice of "low-order" and "high-order" questioning and thinking but by not using those limiting terms, it allows teachers to form their own questions using the functions of questions as a guideline. In other words, we go back to asking ourselves as teachers, "What learning principle do I want my students to gain when I phrase and ask this question?"

## ASK THE EXPERTS: AUTHORS, PARENTS, EDUCATORS, AND TEACHERS

The usefulness of reading aloud to children at an early age was discovered and formulated mainly by parents, when they saw their children learn how to read and write as a result of being read to, and by teachers, who discovered that students were engaged the most when they were read aloud to in an interesting fashion. In fact, Mem Fox, who is the author of several children's books, began writing and lecturing about the qualities of reading aloud when she saw that her own daughter had gained a grasp of reading because of being read to (Fox, 2001). Similarly, Jim Trelease, considered one of the popular authorities on reading aloud for children, with over a million copies sold of his book, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (1982, 1985, 1989, 1995, 2001), said that he began reading aloud to his children back in the 1960s when this practice was unheard of: "Each night I read to my daughter and son, unaware of any cognitive or emotional benefits" (Trelease, 2001, p. xv).

Fox, who is also a prolific children's book author, said very similar things in her book on reading aloud, called *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever* (2001). However, Fox concentrates on an imperative aspect of reading aloud, that of creating an emotional bond with children: "Reading aloud shouldn't be thought of as a grimacing This is Good For Your Child event for mothers and fathers"; rather, she emphasizes that when reading aloud to children, one should concentrate on having a "rollicking good time" so that it becomes "a delicious 'chocolate' kind of experience" (pp. 10–11), reminding us of Rosenblatt's transactional theory, where a "poem" is formed. Further, Fox said,

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> Engaging in this kind of conspiracy with children is perhaps the greatest benefit of reading aloud to them. As we share the words and pictures, the ideas and viewpoints, the rhythms and rhymes, the pain and comfort, and the hopes and fears and the big issues of life that we encounter together in the pages of a book, we connect through minds and hearts with our children and bond closely in a secret society with the books we have shared. The fire of literacy is created by the emotional sparks between a child, a book, and the person reading. It isn't achieved by the book alone, nor by the child alone, nor by the adult who's reading aloud—it's the relationship winding between all three, bringing them together in easy harmony. (p. 10)

Along with the emotional aspect of reading aloud, Fox cites brain research to support her theory on oral language development. She rightly says that the more we talk with our children about books and with books through reading aloud, the sharper their brains get at helping them figure out language. Through simple logic she says that while programs on television such as *Reading Rainbow* in the United States and *Book Place* in Australia "have great merit because they teach children about stories and how they work . . . it doesn't develop children's ability to speak . . . . Television doesn't talk to children—it talks at them and they can't talk back, and talking back is what learning language is all about" (Fox, 2001, p. 18). In emphasizing the importance of "talking back," Fox touches on the necessity for interaction, the need for contact, and the constant back and forth of enjoying a read-aloud together.

Interaction, as we know, has been at the heart of many tried and trusted learning theories, such as Vygotsky's (1939) "zone of proximal development," the crucial time when a child is on the verge of learning something new but cannot achieve that without interaction with a more knowledgeable peer who is present at the zone of proximal development to push the limits of the zone. In a read-aloud, the more knowledgeable peer reads aloud as the child listens and questions, interacts with gestures, learns new terms for and connects with the reading peer. This interaction in a read-aloud is critical to the learning process.

Amongst the words of wisdom on reading aloud that this prolific children's author gives us are "Mem Fox's Ten Read-Aloud Commandments," which can be accessed at her Web site: http://www.memfox.com/ten-read-aloud-commandments.html (Fox, n.d.). These include some well-known read-aloud necessities such as reading aloud for at least 10 minutes a day every day, as well as some that are refreshing, like "Read aloud with animation . . . don't be dull, flat, or boring. Hang loose and be loud" (Fox, n.d.).

In conclusion, although educators and teachers know the fabulous advantages of reading aloud, often they get caught up in the quagmire of the lesson, checking to see if students understood the plot rather than enjoying the story itself. As Fox (n.d.) said in her commandments, "Never ever *teach* reading or get tense around books";

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rather, showing students the fun of reading and how enjoyable it is makes reading something that they would want to do rather than have to do.

Each year, there are countless reports, research articles, books, and chapters that are published by educators that talk about the importance of reading aloud. Many well-known journals publish peer-reviewed articles on children's books, reader responses in the classroom, or simply the innovative ways in which classroom teachers have used reading aloud and what purposes these have served. Although it is not in the scope of this chapter or this book to go into details of these, the bottom line that should be emphasized is that when students are read aloud to, at any age, within any group, they become better readers and writers. When students are read to with the principles of a critical read-aloud in mind, they also become critical learners and questioners.

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR THE TEACHER

1. What criteria can I come up with to analyze and choose books that have wide audience appeal and possibilities for critical analysis?
2. Before asking a question, ask yourself this: "What learning principle do I want my students to learn when I ask . . . ?"
3. What do I want this question to do (for me, for the students)?
4. How can I build a context for my read-aloud so that students will be more engaged?
5. What books have possibilities for me to use an animated voice, expression, gestures, and so on?
6. What criteria could I use to find that "special angle" or point of view to hook my students into the reading?

## SAMPLE RESPONSE LESSON 3.1

### Change Is Not Easy

**Primary Grades (Pre-K to K): In the Classroom, by Teachers, Parents, or Tutors**

Duration: 1 to 2 Hours

*Overview*

The teacher picks a book that has wide audience appeal and possibilities for critical analysis, such as *Clara Caterpillar* by Pamela Duncan Edwards, illustrated by Henry Cole. The teacher

begins by starting a discussion on change: "Has there been a time when you were told you had to do something but you didn't want to?" For this age group, the teacher may need to give a few examples for students to understand. After a brief discussion, the teacher begins the read-aloud by saying, "Well today we are going to read a book about Clara, who also didn't like change."

The teacher will read aloud and stop at two points in the story to help students understand Clara's reluctance to change. The teacher then shows a prewritten letter from Clara's mother, which asks for their help in getting Clara out (example shown later in this lesson).

Students discuss and brainstorm what should be done to help Clara get over this change. Students may be put into small groups to make drawings and crafts for helping Clara. After the discussion, the teacher continues the read-aloud to finish the story. The teacher helps students make connections to other books on caterpillars, like Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar.*

***Materials***

Large, prepared letter, addressed to students; *Clara Caterpillar* book; markers; scissors; paper; glue; and other craft materials as needed

***Key Vocabulary and Terms***

Courageous, Contented, Curious (and many other C words), Caterpillar, Chrysalis, etc.

***Anticipatory Set***

1. *Focus:* Students learn to solve a problem that they can relate to: "change." Students learn to work together in a group to brainstorm and solve a problem.
2. *Objective:* By the end of the lesson, students learn to creatively address a situation and find ways to help Clara accept change from an egg to a caterpillar and to go inside the chrysalis to become a butterfly. They also learn the life cycle of a butterfly.
3. *Transfer:* As students brainstorm about how to help Clara change smoothly, they may begin to understand that change and transitions are necessary for them to grow, just as for Clara.

***Instructions***

1. The teacher gathers students around or at a designated read-aloud spot and begins a discussion on change. The teacher may give an example from her own life when change was good for her but she was reluctant. The teacher asks for input from students about similar stories in their lives.
2. The teacher begins the read-aloud and stops at the point where the other caterpillars are trying to get Clara out of her egg. She stops after Clara says, "But I'm comfortable in here" (p. 4). The teacher then stops and asks students, "What should we do? Clara

*(Continued)*

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(Continued)

doesn't want to come out!" The teacher has a short discussion and continues reading aloud until she comes to the page that says, "Then one day Cornelius called, 'Clara come and make your chrysalis'" (p. 11). The teacher stops again and asks students the following: "Do you think Clara is going to make her chrysalis? She loves being a caterpillar; hmmm, I don't know. . . . " The idea here is to get students excited and anticipate what will happen next.

3. The teacher then shows the big prewritten letter and says, "You know, I received this letter from Clara's mother. Let's see what it says." The letter, written on big chart paper so that all children can view it, may say something like this:

   Dear Class ______________________________

   My name is Mrs. Cabbage and I am Clara's mother. I have a problem and I hope you can all help me! You see, Clara, my daughter, won't go into her chrysalis because she loves being a caterpillar. And if she doesn't go into her chrysalis, she won't grow up to be a beautiful butterfly. Please help! I heard you all are experts on butterflies and know all about them.

   I hope you will help me.

   Sincerely,
   Mrs. Cabbage

4. The teacher then asks students, "Do you think we can help Mrs. Cabbage?" The teacher brainstorms with the whole group and then divides it into smaller groups so that students can work on their ideas. The teachers allows time for students to complete their arts and crafts.

***Independent Practice***

Students showcase their group work and the class may work on a butterfly project. Students may read other books on butterflies and connect to this one.

***Closure***

Students enact being inside a chrysalis. They may use expressions from the book such as, "I'm crushed, I'm creased, I'm crumpled," and so forth (see pp. 15–16 in the read-aloud book). The idea is to be silly and have fun.

## EXAMPLE OF RESPONSE TO LESSON 3.1

*Butterfly Project Created by a Preschool Class (ages 3–5):* One 4-year-old student suggested that they make a "rainbow" chrysalis so that Clara finds it more interesting to go and explore inside. The rest of the class decided this was a good idea and

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made it a class project by making a huge rainbow chrysalis. They used butcher paper, which they painted with rainbow colors as a class, and then the teacher helped them glue it up to look like a chrysalis. This was hung in the middle of the class for all to see. Throughout the week, students pretended to talk with Clara (who had apparently gone into the chrysalis) to encourage her and ask her how she was doing and when she planned to come out as a butterfly.

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## Sample Response Lesson 3.2

### Negotiating a Deal

**Elementary Grades: (1st to 5th): In the Classroom, by Teachers, Parents, or Tutors**

**Duration: 1 to 2 Hours**

***Overview***

The teacher begins with a discussion to set the context for the read-aloud by asking a series of well-chosen questions around negotiating a deal. The teacher may want to connect this with a real-life or current issue, such as a union negotiating a deal (e.g., teachers' union, grocery store workers' union, Writers Guild of America negotiating a deal with big studios, Screen Actors Guild, etc.). Students may be familiar with these as they see these things on television or hear about them in the news. The teacher begins to read aloud a popular picture book like, *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type,* by Doreen Cronin. The teacher reads with great animation until the end.

Students are asked to recall a time in their lives when they had to negotiate a deal. This may be inconsequential like, "Eat your vegetables and you get ice cream for dessert," or it may be much more important. Students are given scenarios where they would want to negotiate a deal with the classroom, with the school, or with their teacher. The students are asked to create points to discuss in small groups that they could then use to persuade the deal to go through.

***Materials***

Large butcher paper, markers, read-aloud book (*Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type,* by Doreen Cronin)

***Key Vocabulary and Terms***

Typewriter, Ultimatum, Strike, Neutral Party, Deal, Negotiation

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

***Anticipatory Set***

1. *Focus:* The students learn that we use negotiation techniques every day in our lives for inconsequential as well as consequential things. Students learn to become persuasive writers and thinkers, especially in terms of what is fair and unfair. Students learn to view things from various perspectives and think from the framework of lawyers who may negotiate on a daily basis.
2. *Objective:* By the end of the lesson, students know all the processes that go into negotiating a deal. They learn about labor unions and how and why labor unions work within a democracy.
3. *Transfer:* By the end of the lesson, students are shown the connections between this funny story and real-life issues, such as Cesar Chavez's struggle to negotiate a fair deal for farmworkers through their union and other such real-life examples. Students also make connections to political negotiations and issues that are current in today's world.

***Instructions***

1. The teacher begins with setting the context for the read-aloud by asking students if they have ever heard of people in a labor union or if they have ever heard of negotiating a deal, and so forth. The teacher gives some information and examples from real life that are current.
2. The teacher reads aloud *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type,* by Doreen Cronin.
3. The teacher asks selected open-ended questions to lead the students to make connections between the story and real life. The teacher also provides other books to help students make intertextual connections. The teacher may use a books such as *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez,* by Kathleen Krull.
4. The teacher provides students with preset scenarios that would be relevant to them and that they could then negotiate with the class, the school, or with the principal. This could be class-lead by asking the students the following: "If there was something you wish you could have in school, what would it be?" "In small groups, how could you begin to negotiate for this?"

### Modifications: Middle and Secondary Grades

The lesson would be very similar except the read-aloud used could be books such as *Animal Farm,* by George Orwell, or *Kids at Work,* by Lewis Hine, or other nonfiction works that discuss labor unions.

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Brown, A. (1998). *Voices in the park*. New York: DK Children's Books.

Although this is a simple tale of a mother who takes her son and dog to the park, the illustrations are so layered and full of possibilities for critique, analysis, and meaning-making, that it is actually a very complex book. Children of all ages and even adults will find interesting and stimulating images on each page. Recommended age 0 and up.

Duncan, A. F. (2005). *Honey baby sugar child*. New York: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing.

With beautiful colors and realistic action pictures, this book shows a mother and her baby playing throughout the day. The words depict the African American language as the mother says, "I wanna kiss ya, squeeze ya till the sugar's gone. . . . Child I wanna eat you up." Recommended age 0 and up.

Fleischman, P. (1997). *Seedfolks*. New York: HarperTeen Books.

This vignette-style short novel tells the story of a community that is brought together by the beauty of a garden. The garden is started by one girl who plants some seeds in a plot of land that is until then used as a landfill. Latino(a), Korean, Haitian, young, old, and sick all come together and gain something out of this garden. Each vignette is told from the point of view of a new character as we are introduced to everyone who lives in the apartment next to the plot. Recommended age 9 years and up.

Lionni, L. (1973). *Swimmy*. New York: Knopf Children's Paperbacks.

Swimmy is a small black fish who leads a carefree life in the deep ocean with his friends until the tuna fish starts eating them when they go out to play. Swimmy teaches his friends to swim in formation so that the tuna fish think they are one big fish. It teaches a lesson on camouflage. Recommended age 0 and up.

Lionni, L. (1995). *Little Blue and Little Yellow*. New York: HarperCollins.

Little Blue and Little Yellow are friends and like to follow each other around. One day they lose each other and when they find each other again they hug so much that they turn green. This is a sweet tale of friendship that also shows primary colors and changes when colors mix. Recommended age 0 and up.

Levine, E. (2007). *Henry's freedom box*. New York: Scholastic Inc.

This story is based on a true story first retold in an 1872 publication about the Underground Railroad. Excellently illustrated by Kadir Nelson, the book shows the beauty, dignity, and integrity of the Black people: "Do you see those leaves blowing in the wind? They are torn from the trees like slave children are torn from their families," says Henry's mother in the story. In it, Henry, a slave, hides himself in a box and mails himself to freedom. Recommended age 4 years and up.

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Mora, P. (1994). *Agua, agua, agua.* Tucson, AZ: Good Year Books.

This is a popular fable about a raven who is thirsty but cannot reach the water it seeks. Told in simple language yet vibrant colors, this makes a great read-aloud for a beginning Spanish reader. Recommended age 0 and up.

Mora, P. (1996). *Confetti poems for children.* New York: Lee & Low Books.

This book contains short narrative poems; some are bilingual, using both Spanish and English words, showing various scenarios in the Southwestern way of life. Vibrant illustrations by Enrique Sanchez make this a wonderful read-aloud book for an early childhood audience. Recommended age 0 and up.

Taylor, M. D. (1998). *The friendship.* New York: Puffin Books.

This is one of the tales told through the eyes of the Logan children. Set in 1930s Mississippi, it reflects the racism and struggles of the African American community. In this story, Tom Bee and Wallace are friends but Tom Bee is African American and Wallace is White. The Logan children witness the betrayal of this friendship as Wallace shoots Tom Bee. Recommended age 8 years and up.

Taylor, M. D. (2003). *Song of the trees.* New York: Puffin Books.

This is another tale of the Logan family, this time told through the voice of Casey as she witnesses racism against her family that owns some land. There are suspenseful moments as Casey happens to hear a plot to illegally cut down trees on her land. Recommended age 8 years and up.

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