

Lessons From a Professional Learning Community on Critical Reading and Critical Literacy With Multicultural Texts

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Introduction

Content-based instruction that reflects students' personal histories, communities, and cultures can improve their learning.¹ In early literacy, most studies of elementary students in classrooms where educators used texts aligned with students' cultural backgrounds reported academic success outcomes in reading, such as vocabulary, comprehension, and word recognition.² However, some educators are unable to discuss topics related to students' racial and ethnic, language, and immigrant backgrounds due to emerging curricular restrictions,³ while others are reluctant to discuss these topics in the classroom due to personal beliefs about the role of educators or time and resource limitations.⁴ These concerns limit educators' use of multicultural texts—i.e., texts that feature characters with a wide variety of racial and ethnic, cultural, and social experiences.⁵ Additionally, educators may hesitate to use texts that depict differences in opportunity, social acceptance, and mistreatment experienced across the groups that the characters represent.

What are critical reading and critical literacy instruction?

Critical reading and critical literacy⁶ instruction are educational practices that help students critique authors and texts (critical reading) and examine power relations between texts and the broader world (critical literacy). Educators who engage in these practices with multicultural texts can bolster students' sense of self⁷ and build the analytical skills⁸ needed to be strong, engaged readers.

Several strategies can help address challenges in implementing content-based instruction in literacy that reflects students' cultural backgrounds. First, drawing on multicultural texts already included in the curriculum can create opportunities to highlight connections between the text and students' cultural background, easing time and resource constraints. Second, using instructional practices that encourage critical evaluation of texts can provide clear guidance for facilitating read-aloud discussions about the experiences of characters featured in multicultural texts, reducing hesitation around these discussions.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a practical way to involve educators in ongoing conversations about applying new instructional practices—like critical reading and critical literacy instruction (see the text box above for a description of these instructional practices).⁹ A PLC is a group of educators who work collaboratively to improve their teaching in the service of improving student learning. Effective PLCs can produce changes in student outcomes and generate a broad range of changes in educators' attitudes and beliefs, content knowledge, and teaching.¹⁰ By implementing strategies to teach with multicultural texts in a cooperative environment alongside their colleagues using the same curriculum, educators can promote literacy instruction that reflects students' cultural backgrounds and strengthens their capacity to analyze texts.

This brief presents findings and lessons learned from a pilot study of a PLC designed to support early literacy educators' use of multicultural texts, including (but not limited to) those from a district English language arts curriculum, to advance critical reading and critical literacy instruction. The authors use the phrase "early literacy educators" to denote those educators who were part of the pilot PLC. In other instances, the word "educators" refers to any professional person who provides instruction to students. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with early literacy educators before and after the PLC, we present three key findings on early literacy educators' teaching beliefs, literacy instruction, and overall PLC experience. We offer recommendations for educators to consider as they build their capacity to implement instructional strategies focused on developing their students' critical reading and critical literacy skills.

Methodology and Data

Members of the study team piloted an eight-month virtual PLC with 11 early literacy educators (pre-K through Grade 2) with limited experience in critical reading and critical literacy instruction during the 2021–22 school year. All early literacy educators were women and taught in one urban school district that served a large proportion of students who identified as African American/Black or Hispanic/Latino. The largest proportion of early literacy educators identified as White, followed by African American/Black, while smaller proportions identified as Hispanic/Latino and multiracial. On average, early literacy educators had 7.68 years of teaching experience.

The PLC was originally designed to focus on using multicultural texts for children (picture books) that depict individuals from "heritage" backgrounds, as defined in the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)'s diversity subjects,¹¹ to facilitate critical, interactive read-aloud discussions. The CCBC is a noncirculating library at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that has compiled data on books for children and teens published by and about "Black, Indigenous, and people of color" since 1985.¹² PLC content was informed by a content analysis of picture books from the district's English language arts curriculum and engagement activities with school and district leaders.¹³ Based on the content analysis and feedback received through the study's engagement activities, the PLC focused on facilitating read-aloud discussions using picture books that depict (a) individuals from heritage backgrounds; (b) individuals with a disability;¹⁴ (c) individuals who are women or whose gender identity/expression differs from the conventional gender norms;¹⁵ and (d) individuals with a lower social and economic status.¹⁶

The PLC began with introductory sessions on critical reading, critical literacy, and common challenges with using multicultural picture books. Most PLC sessions examined depictions of the four social groups described in the previous paragraph within multicultural picture books, such as specific values among members of a social group or group members' experience with discrimination. While some picture books depict individuals belonging to multiple or intersecting social groups (e.g., the experiences of a Black student with a disability), sessions identified a single group on which to focus a critical read-aloud for these novice critical literacy and critical reading educators. Early literacy educators received copies of at least one multicultural picture book of their choosing from each social group for use during their critical read-aloud discussions. These sessions also included grade-based lesson planning and guided reflections on early literacy educators' experience facilitating critical read-aloud discussions about these social groups. The PLC concluded with a review of critical reading and critical literacy instructional strategies.

Key Findings

Finding #1: Following the PLC, early literacy educators expressed more favorable views regarding students' ability to engage in critical conversations; however, some educators were still reluctant to discuss certain topics.

Prior to participating in the PLC, some early literacy educators were hesitant to discuss with their students the social groups addressed in the series and the discrimination these groups experience. They referenced both personal (e.g., fear of saying something wrong) and external factors (e.g., lack of administrative support) as major barriers to having these discussions. After the series, however, early literacy educators noted the importance of using picture books in ways that allow their students to “see themselves.” They also prioritized ensuring that students are supported as they interact with their peers in the classroom and navigate exposure to experiences with discrimination in their daily lives (e.g., in their engagement with community members, families, or media). They noted students’ awareness of the issues around them and their openness to critical discussions. For example, one early literacy educator mentioned being able to discuss the topic of gender with her young students because they handled critical conversations in a mature manner (see the quote from a participating first grade educator in the text box).

“I still think I'm still beginning this journey of having these conversations with kids. I'm realizing that there's not a topic that kids can't talk about. I'd had the idea before that maybe conversations around gender differences might not be appropriate for first grade, but we've had those conversations. The kids are just like, 'OK, you know we've got this.' They're handling it in an incredibly mature fashion.”

– First-grade educator

While early literacy educators reported feeling comfortable overall with facilitating read-aloud discussions on specific social groups, some were still hesitant to discuss the topics covered in the PLC based on anticipated pushback from families and lacking confidence in knowing the types of questions to ask (or not ask). Some early literacy educators continued to cite a student's ability to engage in such conversations as a barrier, mentioning challenges such as difficulty noticing more subtle depictions of social groups (e.g., differences in clothing as a sign of lower social and economic status) and limitations in their comprehension skills.

Finding #2: Following the PLC, most early literacy educators reported greater intentionality in their multicultural picture book selection and read-aloud discussions, even if the picture books in their classrooms did not necessarily change.

Before the PLC, early literacy educators’ picture book selections focused on depictions of broad categories, such as civil rights leaders, different cultural practices (e.g., foods, holidays), skin color, and family structures. Early literacy educators reported using these picture books during specific times of the year (e.g., Hispanic Heritage Month), when reacting to comments made by their students (e.g., “Boys can’t wear pink.”), and when these picture books were part of the district’s curriculum. Notably, prior to the PLC, participants’ reported use of picture books from the curriculum did not consider characters’ social and cultural backgrounds. After the PLC, early literacy educators reported being more conscious about the social backgrounds of the picture book authors and ensuring that picture books reflected students’ personal experiences. They described facilitating proactive, critical read-aloud discussions after the PLC in ways that helped students relate to peers who were different from themselves and in ways that explicitly addressed

“When we went back to gym in the fourth quarter, I knew we were going to have a little girl who has adaptive [physical education] join us. We read a couple of books about disability, and it affected how accepting [my students] were. She's a former student of mine, and she is like, 'Your class is really nice this year. They didn't ask me any questions. They don't look at me funny.' Some of that is that they're just great kids, but some of it is we had had those discussions.”

– Kindergarten educator

the topics of fairness and inclusion (see the quote from a participating Kindergarten educator in the text box). Several early literacy educators also shared that they used picture books from the curriculum to engage in conversations about social expectations, such as gender norms, after attending the PLC sessions. They recounted modifications they made to their existing instructional tools, like anchor charts, to integrate students' learning from their critical read-alouds with what they learned from participating in other curricular literacy activities.

Although most early literacy educators reported having a wider selection of multicultural picture books after the sessions, some early literacy educators shared that the multicultural picture books in their classrooms did not change after participating in the series. These early literacy educators noted that they already had an ample selection of picture books in their classrooms.

Finding #3: Following the PLC, early literacy educators highlighted the series' strengths in fostering collaboration and providing strategies for using multicultural picture books and facilitating discussions; however, balancing integration of what they learned with their day-to-day classroom responsibilities remained a key challenge.

Early literacy educators consistently highlighted collaboration as a major strength of the PLC, particularly the opportunity to work with colleagues in similar roles. They noted that collaboration fostered idea sharing and helped them gain insights into how others approached their lessons (see the quote from a participating special educator in the text box). Additionally, early literacy educators shared that the PLC provided them with useful strategies for selecting multicultural picture books (e.g., what a "multicultural picture book" is/isn't and different types of multicultural picture books) and facilitating discussions about the social groups and types of discrimination addressed in the PLC with students. Finally, the structured format, including topic sequencing and modeling approaches to the lessons by the PLC facilitator, was also praised by early literacy educators. They noted that the format was instrumental in helping them feel prepared to integrate multicultural picture books into their lessons.

"I think just hearing feedback from other teachers who were in the same shoes as me. Like, I can just think of [PLC participant] ... hearing that her kids are asking similar questions. I worked with [PLC participant], and that was huge. Working with someone [during PLC session activities] that is doing your same position is amazing.

Hearing how she was going with it and her having similar kids in her room and things like that, and how she was approaching the book was amazing. We fed off of each other's ideas and things like that. Just hearing how they did it in their room was very helpful."

– Pre-K to Grade 2 special educator

Still, while early literacy educators appreciated having the PLC facilitator model a lesson for them, some early literacy educators suggested incorporating videos of other educators (potentially those participating in the PLC) conducting read-alouds and facilitating discussions with their students using multicultural picture books. They noted that it would be helpful to see how an educator navigates a lesson in their classroom. Early literacy educators also expressed ongoing concerns about one main challenge: balancing what they learned in the PLC with their regular classroom responsibilities. This difficulty was often due to strict school schedules or curriculum requirements.

Recommendations for Educators

Findings from this study emphasize the benefits of a PLC focused on multicultural texts, critical reading, and critical literacy for early literacy educators, as well as barriers that these educators faced in applying lessons from the PLC in their classrooms. As other educators consider including elements of critical reading and critical literacy into their existing literacy instruction, lessons gleaned from participants in our pilot study can aid them in determining how to initiate this work. Specifically, we recommend that educators:

- **Actively reflect on their teaching beliefs** and the extent to which they inform literacy instructional activities that build on students' strengths, cultural and background knowledge, and development.
- **Establish a respectful classroom community built on trusting relationships.** This foundation is essential for fostering proactive and responsive read-aloud discussions about diverse social experiences using multicultural texts.
- **Collaborate with colleagues—including grade-level peers, educators in similar roles, and school leaders**—to establish PLCs to support the integration of discussions using multicultural texts within the literacy curriculum in ways that reflect the experiences of diverse groups.

Resources for Educators

These resources can be used to locate multicultural texts and support critical reading and critical literacy instruction:

The **CCBC** provides literature resources for finding books organized around different themes and topics.¹⁷

The **Institute of Education Sciences** developed guidance for developing interactive read-alouds.¹⁸

The **National Education Association** lists organizations offering free and low-cost books to educators.¹⁹

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Endnotes

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