

What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

Kelly, Laminack, and Vasquez have provided a treasure trove of detailed lessons and resources designed to help justice-minded teachers not only understand the need for literacy learning rooted in efforts to address issues of injustice, but also better understand what it might look like in their own classrooms. My hope now is that teachers are brave enough to do the work that needs to be done!

—**Chris Hass, Author of *Social Justice Talk***

Wow. Kelly, Laminack, and Vasquez have created a blueprint for critical comprehension that needs truly to be in the hands of all educators—preservice and veteran. It's the book I want to share with my undergraduate students and the book I want my children's teachers to have. It is rife with concrete examples and beautiful questions to springboard the critical thinkers we all aim to cultivate.

—**Nawal Qarooni, Educator, Author, and Literacy Coach**

Katie Kelly, Lester Laminack, and Vivian Vasquez wrote the book I wish I had when I was first studying critical literacy in grad school many years ago. Not only does this book define critical comprehension for teachers, but it masterfully supports teachers in putting the work of critical comprehension into practice in the classroom. The lessons are practical, meaningful, and highly engaging for students. This is a book I will turn to again and again in my work as a classroom teacher and writer.

—**Christina Nosek, Author of *Answers to Your Biggest Questions About Teaching Elementary Reading***

Critical Comprehension: Lessons for Guiding Students to Deeper Meaning offers teachers a powerful look at ways to support young readers to read with criticality. The book is full of tools, teaching resources, lessons, book lists and questions to help us, as educators, examine our classrooms and practices. I feel fortunate to have this team thinking together and sharing their expertise. The combination of their personal stories and classroom anecdotes makes for very powerful learning as we all work to create inclusive classrooms.

—**Franki Sibberson, Author of *Beyond Leveled Books***

Critical Comprehension: Lessons for Guiding Students to Deeper Meaning encourages educators to read critically, take action, and be part of a necessary global change. Kelly, Laminack, and Vasquez describe opportunities that will allow learners to construct a deeper meaning of texts through a critical literacy lens while moving forward to take social action. This book uses a leading-edge instructional framework to center children of all ages as agents of their own learning. I believe this book will leave you with an overwhelming desire to work alongside young learners and will give you the inspiration and knowledge required to “be the change.”

—**Carolyn Clarke, Assistant Professor,
St. Francis Xavier University**

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Critical Comprehension

Lessons for Guiding Students to Deeper Meaning

Katie Kelly

Lester Laminack

Vivian Vasquez

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Critical Comprehension,
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layered ideas and language, we have refined thought and expression, and we have formed greater bonds of friendship. Katie, we *are* like siblings. We talk every week, we bounce ideas off one another, and we seek advice from one another. We are indeed family. It is a joy to write with you.

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Lester Laminack, professor emeritus, Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, is now a full-time writer and consultant working with schools throughout the United States and abroad. He is the author of more than twenty-five books for teachers and children. His academic publications include *Climb Inside a Poem* (Heinemann), *Cracking Open the Author's Craft* (Scholastic), *Bullying Hurts: Teaching Kindness Through Read Aloud and Guided Conversations* (Heinemann), *The Writing Teacher's Troubleshooting Guide* (Heinemann), *Writers ARE Readers: Flipping Reading Strategies into Writing Instruction* (Heinemann), and *The Ultimate Read Aloud Collection Fiction and Nonfiction* (Scholastic).

Teaching Kindness Through Read Aloud and Guided Conversations (Heinemann), *The Writing Teacher's Troubleshooting Guide* (Heinemann), *Writers ARE Readers: Flipping Reading Strategies into Writing Instruction* (Heinemann), and *The Ultimate Read Aloud Collection Fiction and Nonfiction* (Scholastic).

Lester is also the author of several children's books, including *The Sunsets of Miss Olivia Wiggins*, *Trevor's Wiggly-Wobbly Tooth*, *Saturdays and Tea Cakes*, *Jake's 100th Day of School*, *Snow Day!*, *Three Hens and a Peacock* (2012 Children's Choice K–2 Book of the Year Award), and *The King of Bees*, all published by Peachtree Publishers. His new book, *Three Hens, a Peacock, and the Enormous Egg*, is expected in February 2023, and *A Cat Like That* is expected in 2024.

His newest works are *Reading to Make a Difference* (Heinemann) and *The Ultimate Read Aloud Resource*, 2nd Edition (Scholastic). Lester is available for professional development and school author visits. You can contact him via his website, www.LesterLaminack.com, and follow him on Facebook or on Twitter @Lester_Laminack.



Vivian Vasquez is a professor in the School of Education at American University in Washington, DC. She is a former preschool and elementary school teacher. Her interest in creating spaces for critical literacies, in early years classrooms, began while she was a kindergarten teacher in the early 1990s. She has published numerous articles and book chapters, and she has authored or coauthored fifteen other books, including the award-winning *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*. Vivian's honors and awards include the

Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts Award, the NCTE Advancement of People of Color Award, the AERA Division B Outstanding Book of the Year Award, and the James N. Britton Award. The NCTE Early Childhood Assembly honored her with a scholarship in her name, the Vivian Vasquez Teacher Scholarship. She can be reached at vvasque@american.edu.

This book is for all educators who work tirelessly to support the future generation to develop as critical citizens who strive for a better, more equitable, and just world.

It is for teachers who are entering the profession, for those with experience teaching with a critical lens and it is for those who have come to this work later in life, who are seeking an accessible avenue into making it real for themselves and their students.

We hope this book challenges you, supports you, and strengthens your teaching and learning practices. And for those of you who face the pushback against access to books and information, we hope this book gives you strength to advocate for the right to read and seek and speak truth.

Introduction

Our classrooms are microcosms of the larger more pluralistic society, so it is necessary for us as educators to consider how *who* we are affects *how* we create inclusive spaces where all children thrive. In other words, it's important to recognize how our identities as literacy educators are shaped by our histories. Consider Vivian's experience as a young literacy learner. Vivian was born in the Philippines, to Filipino parents, and her family immigrated to Canada when she was in elementary school.

It was 1965. I was five years old. I remember hurrying home after school one day, rushing to the kitchen and opening the freezer door. I was sure I could scrape off enough frost from the sides of the freezer to make a snowball like Dick and Jane had done in my school primer. I had barely scraped off enough frost to make a tiny ball of ice when it all began to melt in my hand in the heat of that summer day in the Philippines.

For almost half a century, until 1946, the United States governed the Philippines as a colonial power (Casambre, 1982) during which time the United States pursued policies believed to promote the social and material well-being of the people of the Philippines. These policies included the imposition of the American system of education and the use of English as the only language of instruction. The use of the Dick and Jane primer at Vivian's school is one way that elements from the American colonization of the Philippines in the past continued to be entangled in the lives of Filipinx children for many years with remnants that continue to be felt today. Against this historical backdrop, what may, at first, come across as a banal literacy story takes on new life. For a child growing up in the Philippines, the use of the Dick and Jane primer and its stories of life in America in no way took into account Vivian's knowledge and understanding of the

world around her. Instead, the use of such books resulted in what Campano and colleagues (2016) describe as the formation of Vivian as a *racialized other*, in the very country in which she was born. In curricular terms, through the stories of Dick and Jane, she attempted the impossible task of living the experiences of individuals who were not like her, such as playing in the snow. Whose stories were getting told and by whom to Vivian and her classmates? What are the effects when children are not able to see themselves in the books they engage with in their classrooms?

Vivian and her family immigrated to Canada in 1970. Multicultural education, which can be traced historically to the Civil Rights Movement, was only beginning to take root. Similar to her school experiences in the Philippines, there was a disconnect between the texts used in her classroom and her lived experiences. Imagine what a difference it could have made for Vivian and her classmates to engage with books that were culturally sustaining, in which she could see herself, in which others could see her.

Five years before Vivian and her family emigrated from the Philippines to Canada, Lester was attending fourth grade in Alabama.

I was in fourth grade in 1965. Fourth grade was the year children in Alabama studied state history and geography. And each year all the fourth graders loaded on school buses with packed lunches, teachers, and a few mothers for the long drive to Montgomery. The 112-mile trip was a highlight of fourth grade. We toured the monuments and the state buildings and met legislators from our part of the state. We felt grown-up and important that day.

On May 17, 1954, two years before Lester was born, the US Supreme Court issued its landmark decision that struck down the doctrine of “separate but equal” and ordered an end to school segregation. Ten years later, July 2, 1964, the summer before he entered third grade, the Civil Rights Act was signed to end segregation in public places and ban employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Yet, Lester attended all-white public schools in three different states until sixth grade when Black students were allowed to attend the school he attended. It was that same year, in sixth grade, that he had his first Black teacher.

Like Vivian, Lester learned to read with the Dick and Jane primers. However, Lester saw reflections of the world he knew: white faces, heteronormative families, and children playing with friends and going to

school with others who look like them. All schoolbooks, television programs, commercials, movies, magazines, advertisements, and so on reflected that world. Bishop (1990) reminds us that

Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they too have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds. They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans. In the United States, where racism is still one of the major unresolved social problems, books may be one of the few places where children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves. If they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world—a dangerous ethnocentrism. (p. 1)

Lester's reflection on fourth grade confirms this:

As a nine-year-old child, it never occurred to me that I should question why everyone on that bus was white. Or why everyone in the school was white. Or why the focus of our study and textbooks was whitewashed with the portrayals of enslaved African Americans as happy folks working in the rows of cotton, singing gospel songs, and living in the small cottages surrounding the big plantation houses. We did not delve into the capture, transport, or sale of human beings. We did not consider the pain and indignity of forced labor or the unbearable horror of seeing your children or spouse sold and taken away. In fact, we weren't even aware of it. In fourth grade we were taught that once there were four tribes of Native Americans in Alabama—Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek. We didn't delve into the forced removal of the people who had been on the land for generations before the arrival of Europeans. We didn't have conversations or stories revealing where they went, what they lost, and where they are today. As a nine-year-old I never questioned why we didn't learn more about the contributions of the Native people or Black people in the history of our state. As a nine-year-old I accepted what I was given by textbooks and adult authority figures as the truth.

Lester's experience demonstrates the impact of living in a curriculum of mirrors. When everything you read reflects only the world as you know it, you live with a distorted worldview. That narrow view limits curiosity and breeds contempt for, or fear of, difference, and if left unchallenged often results in naive acceptance that perpetuates itself.

Almost two decades later, in the 1980s, Katie attended an elementary school that was fully integrated. Children at Katie's school included white children from her neighborhood and Black children who were bussed into the northside school from Syracuse's southside and the nearby apartments. As a young person she was taught that the Jim Crow era of segregation and racism was part of the past and something that occurred in the South. She developed a color-evasive view of the world, passively accepting the idea that people of color had the same rights and opportunities as whites. It did not occur to her what it might have been like for her classmates to get up early and catch the bus to ride to the other side of town to attend school where the faces of your classmates, teachers, and even characters in the basal readers did not look like your own.

Although schools were integrated, neighborhoods were not. Katie wondered, "Why did we live in different areas? Why were there such socioeconomic differences in these neighborhoods? Why did the Onondaga people live on a reservation just five miles south of downtown Syracuse?" When Katie asked these questions, the typical response from adults was "that's just the way things are." That response left her with unanswered questions and curiosity.

Growing up just a few miles away from Onondaga Lake and living in Onondaga County, why wasn't there a greater emphasis on the name-sake of the area? The Onondaga people are one of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The capital of the Iroquois Confederacy was founded on the shores of Onondaga Lake. Katie recalls her school experiences learning about the history of Native Americans:

In school, we read about "Indians" in our social studies textbooks depicted from a historical lens. We built longhouses out of popsicle sticks and made construction paper feather headdresses for Thanksgiving. We learned the whitewashed version of Thanksgiving depicting the Pilgrims and Native Americans as peaceful and friendly neighbors. We visited Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois (known as the French Fort), a living history museum along the shores of the sacred, yet heavily polluted Onondaga Lake. Here we were told the history of the Haudenosaunee people from the

perspective of the French Jesuits who lived in the fort for just two years. We didn't learn about the history of colonization, the forced removal of the Onondaga from 95 percent of their own land, and the abuse and assimilation at the Indian boarding schools.

We learned about George Washington, the first President of the United States and Revolutionary War general who fought with the separatists against the British. We didn't learn that he launched an attack against the Haudenosaunee people ordering total destruction, burning and looting their villages, destroying their food sources, and capturing men, women, and children as prisoners.

Today, the French fort has been renamed the Skä•noñh—Great Law of Peace Center and focuses on telling the story of the Native people of central New York through the lens of the Onondaga people, and efforts are being made to clean up the heavily polluted Onondaga Lake. Changes such as these are a step forward. However, there is still much work to be done. For instance, the Syracuse City School District is among the most segregated in the country (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014). According to Edbuild (2020), the percentage of nonwhite students in 2016–2017 in Syracuse was 78 percent compared to 13 percent in neighboring Westhill School District. As the city of Syracuse increases in its diversity, the number of whites fleeing to the suburbs has also increased, resulting in a return to greater segregation than when Katie attended school in the 1980s and early 1990s. Shifting population from within the city of Syracuse to the suburbs in the same county has resulted in resegregated schools (Fernández, 2017).

Redlining

Redlining is a discriminatory practice of denying services (e.g., mortgages) to people from certain neighborhoods based on race or ethnicity. Syracuse, like other cities across the country, has a long history of redlining as is demonstrated in a 1919 map (Mulcahy, 2021) (Figure 1.1). This map shows the evolution of redlining with labels for various ethnic groups which eventually morphed into color-coded neighborhoods with coded labels such as “best,” “desirable,” and “hazardous.”

FIGURE I.1 1919 Map of Syracuse (CNY Central)



Source: National Archives and Records Administration. Public Domain.

Examining Our Personal Histories

When we examine our personal histories, we can stop perpetuating the false—and harmful—patterns of white-centered schooling that are so common in the United States.

We must begin by decolonizing ourselves, our curriculum, and our instruction by doing things like questioning who is included in the books and textbooks we bring into our classrooms and who is excluded. We must disrupt the perpetuation of dominant narratives that privilege some people at the expense of others. We must examine texts critically and consider whether individuals and groups are portrayed in authentic ways or if harmful stereotypes send implicit messages. We must be critically conscious and question the world around us from a historical and current lens.

- Why are these changes happening?
- Who benefits from these changes?
- Who is harmed by these changes?
- What changes should be happening but are not?
- Who benefits from maintaining the status quo?
- Who is harmed by keeping things the way they are?

- What do we need to do differently?
- What action can we take to right any wrongs and create greater equity?

We are currently a part of history, and we have the power to shape it.

If we do not ask critical questions such as these, we risk contributing to inequities that favor dominant cultural groups and contribute to the perpetuation of color-evasive attitudes, behaviors, and discourses that negatively impact systems such as education.

Who we are and how we perceive ourselves are shaped by intersecting and converging factors, including our histories. How we move through the world is also shaped by many factors, including when we were born, where we have lived and with whom, events we experienced in our social worlds, and texts that we encountered.

Pause to Reflect

What moments in your history and what experiences with texts have contributed to shaping who you are today? How have these influenced the beliefs that you hold? Here are some questions to help you reflect on your earliest memories of reading.

- Did the characters look like you?
- How often did you see nations or cultures that were relatable to you?
- How often were representations of your nation or culture accurate?
- How often were representations of your nation or culture inaccurate?
- How often did you see representations of your gender identity?
- How often did you see representations of your religious beliefs?
- Did the family structures parallel yours?
- Did the characters' or their families' experiences mirror yours?
- Do you recall wondering or questioning the portrayal of family?
- Do you recall the celebrations, the food, or the social activities of those characters? Did they reflect those of your family? Were they accurate representations or were they offensive representations?
- Were there certain celebrations that you felt were private and should not have been included?

Reflecting on Our Reading Histories

We remember reading in school as a task assigned by the teacher rather than meaningful, purposeful, or critical practice. Reading was often followed by a set of questions to answer, a book report, or some sort of written task. Opportunities for authentic reading where we chose books based on our interests and read for our own purposes were limited. Further, any efforts to nudge our thinking beyond surface-level understanding to find the “right” answers were nonexistent. In all subjects, including social studies, science, and health, we were typically assigned to read a chapter from the textbook and then directed to answer the questions at the end of the chapter. A single text for each subject area was the source of information.

Pause to Reflect

Reflecting on Your Own School Experiences

Think back to the curriculum from your own schooling.

- What was taught?
- Who was teaching?
- How was it taught?
- Whose perspective was centered?
- Was there representation of the contributions of people of color? If so, how were they represented?
- What nations or cultures were missing from the texts you read?
- Was there equal representation of the contributions of men, women, and gender nonbinary individuals?
- Was the representation of the contributions of people who were considered “famous” mostly white? Mostly men?
- Was there an inordinate focus on governance written by white male leaders?
- Were there policies and practices that placed limitations on people of color?

Astute readers may have noticed that the presentation of questions, usually found at the end of each chapter, moved through the chapter sequentially and were often interrogative versions of the topic sentence, some key detail, or fact. If you had similar experiences, then you may remember that those questions were often keyed to statements in the chapter. Reading like this could become a mindless process of lifting language from the text to match the wording in the question. It could feel somewhat like a steam shovel scooping up details from the text, dropping them into the dump truck driven by the questions, and dumping those onto a clean page for the teacher. We remember dutifully reading (and sometimes skimming) the chapter, writing each question then searching for and copying the answer before moving on to the next question. Reading was reduced to fact-finding, shuffling information, and filling in the blanks as an act of compliance where the teacher was the authority and holder of knowledge.

Without a meaningful purpose for reading, there were times when we “fake read” our way through the assigned reading at school. We began by skimming the questions and then looked up the answers without ever really reading the material. Did you do that too? This suggests that for many of us, reading in school was simply a task to complete with limited opportunities or guidance to delve into purposeful reading for deeper understanding, constructing meaning, exploration, and critical thinking.

When thinking back on our K–12 schooling experiences (even though we attended schools in different locations and in different decades), none of us can remember being taught to question the information we read or people in positions of authority (such as the teacher or the author). It was never suggested that an alternative version of this information could exist or that some stories and perspectives were left out, let alone why this happens. In fact, the notion that a textbook issued by the state or texts selected by a teacher could contain information that was in any way biased or incomplete was just unfathomable to us. As children we consumed the “facts” we were fed and assumed the teacher and the author of the text were authorities on the topic. We never realized how malnourished our reading lives were. This is how our families were taught and the generations before them as well. This instructional history created generations of readers who consume text without question.

Pause to Reflect

Considering Your Literacy History

Pause a moment to consider your own literacy history.

- What do you recall about the way you were taught reading in school?
- What kinds of spaces did your teacher create for you to question or confront the text?
- What kinds of spaces did your teacher create for you to challenge the text or to push back against the information in a text and seek counternarratives?
- Was there a time when your teacher told you the text was only one version of the truth and assigned you the task to find the stories of the missing voices or perspectives?
- Recall a book or text that caused you to question the intentions of the author, or the accuracy of historical events, or consider alternate perspectives.
- Recall a book or text that resulted in an “aha” moment for you that had an impact on you in some way. Where did you encounter the text? What effect did this text have on you and your actions?
- What factors influenced the reader and person you are today?
- What is your personal literacy legacy?
- What is the literacy legacy of your family?
- How does it position you to accept or challenge text?
- How does it position you with power and privilege?
- In what ways do you question texts and the world around you?

We All Start Somewhere

In order to teach children to read critically, we must first be critically literate ourselves. We came to this understanding as adults when we were first introduced to and embraced a critical literacy stance as a vehicle to seek and understand a broader, more equitable, and just version of truth. From a critical literacy perspective, we learned that examining our own assumptions, values, and beliefs is part of “understanding the position(s) from which we speak, the position(s) from which we teach and the Discourses (ways of being, doing, acting, talking, and thinking)

that shape those positionings” (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 23). Prior to this awakening and development of a critical lens, none of us routinely questioned the word and the world around us (Freire & Macedo, 1987). With critical literacy as part of our theoretical toolkit, we learned to use our past experiences to question our assumptions about what we read, who wrote it, what their intentions were, or how the text benefits some while harming others.

As with other experiences that broaden our perspective and deepen our understanding, new insight alters the way we view text and the world ever after. Even young children can learn to notice that a story is being presented in a way that favors one character, voice, or perspective. Young children are naturally curious about themselves, others, and the world around them. They often pose questions to seek more information or greater understanding. Consider how often young children ask “why” and “how” questions about their worlds. For example, one of the books that Vivian’s kindergarten students enjoyed reading was *Baby Beluga* by Raffi. The children loved that it was such a happy story about Beluga whales until one of the children saw a news clip about how these whales were on the decline in the St. Lawrence River as a result of pollution, reduced food resources, disturbance by humans, and habitat degradation. With Vivian’s support after many discussions and research, the children decided they needed to do something to help the plight of the Beluga. One of the things they did was to create an alternate version of the text (see Figure I.2) which they shared with the other kindergarten classrooms as a way to offer a perspective that was different from the original book (Vasquez, 2014).

FIGURE I.2 Example of Revised *Baby Beluga* Text

Original Text	Alternate Version Text
<p>Baby Beluga in the deep blue sea swim so wild and you swim so free heaven above and the sea below and a little white whale on the go.</p>	<p>Baby Beluga in the deep blue sea please help us so we can be. The garbage in the water doesn't let us be free. Please save us from this pollution.</p>

As educators, we have a responsibility to help children move beyond a passive acceptance of text and the world around them. Rather than dismissing the children’s questions and issues, let’s embrace their

inquiries, assist them with seeking answers, and nurture their ongoing natural critical curiosity as Vivian did with her students. If children are taught to accept all that is presented to them at face value without ever questioning the content or the intention, the inclusion/exclusion of voices, and their assumptions; if they are not provided opportunities to deconstruct text(s) to examine social, cultural, and political issues, they are more likely to be indoctrinated into the dominant ideology (McDaniel, 2004). In other words, when readers fail to question texts or authorities, they are more likely to be manipulated by them. “For too long kids have felt powerless in their classrooms

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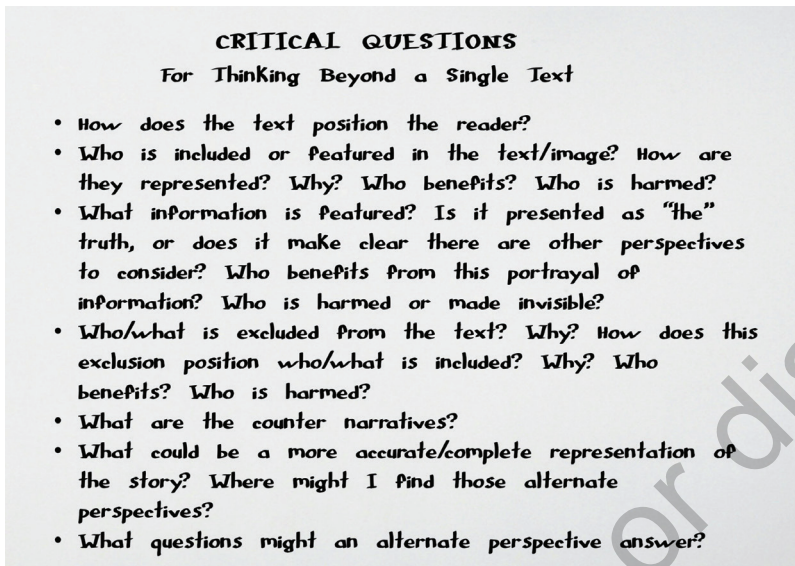
because they spend their days being told what to learn, how to learn it, and what to think about this all afterwards” (Hass, 2020, p. 21). When reading critically students broaden their thinking, expand their perspectives, and deepen their understanding. When empowered with these insights,

children are more likely to take a stand against injustices and take action to make a difference for a better world (Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Laminack & Kelly, 2019).

Further, traditional approaches that center teachers’ interests rather than students’ interests rob children of important learning experiences to develop critical thinking and a sense of agency to take action in the future (Hass, 2020, p. xv). Literacy is empowering and transformative. Learning to question information, power structures, and/or people in positions of power is essential to a just society. Learning to uncover alternative perspectives opens the potential for more authentic and purposeful conversations within a community and fosters greater action for justice and equity. Learning to seek out the voices and stories of the underrepresented is a step toward excavating truths, even when it challenges what we have always believed.

Critical Comprehension in Action

Our goal in writing this book is to offer opportunities for children to think beyond what is presented in a single text, as a single truth to seek counternarratives that can help them construct a more nuanced, complicated, informed, and accurate truth. When we teach children to be critical readers—to question the commonplace, to evaluate text for stereotyping and tokenism, to disrupt biases, and to seek counternarratives—they begin to weave threads to create more complete tapestries of truth. We can begin to do this work by asking questions such as those listed in Figure I.3.

FIGURE I.3 Critical Questions

Engaging in conversations based on questions like these results in a shift away from the passive acceptance of, and search for, “the” correct meaning and is the basis of what we refer to as critical comprehension. This book is our attempt to demonstrate how to create spaces for critical conversations to develop critical comprehension using a series of lessons.

Each lesson features one book but also includes a list of alternatives for additional work to extend thought and insight. As is the case with all of the lessons in this book, we offer these ideas as a starting point and encourage you to adapt them based on the interests and inquiries of students.

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