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The Stance, the Text, and the Talk: Three Components for Critical Race-Oriented Interactive Read Alouds

by Rebecca Witte

Usually, an article like this will start out describing a literacy scenario, a scene of a teacher reading with a book outstretched and students sitting on the rug listening intently. The article would then capture a snippet of dialogue coming from a well-timed turn-and-talk demonstrating deep thinking surrounding a critical race-related topic. In this case, however, this article does not start out with a descriptive scene or dialogue from my own classroom, because I rarely pulled off such a scenario. Partly because I didn't know how. While I would often use carefully-selected multicultural texts and my (burgeoning) critical racial stance to introduce topics, my lack of tools for facilitating student talk left my students without an opportunity to wrestle with issues found in those texts. Plagued by fear, I worried that I was simultaneously not doing enough to address race and that I would upset parents and administrators by delving into race-related topics (cf, Rogers, 2018). As a result, my teaching around topics of race was anemic.

I would argue, though, that critical racial literacy, a combination of critical and racial literacies, is needed now more than ever. The murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in the summer of 2020 and the subsequent protests that followed have caused some educators to reexamine their practices to be more intentional in their treatment of race in the classroom. But, maybe some of you feel like me—you have a desire to incorporate race-related issues but lack the understanding of how to start. Or, like me, the worry about pushback or worry about watered down or ineffective efforts have kept you from teaching to your full potential. Luckily, there are proven literacy strategies that allow for the infusion of critical racial literacy while also increasing literacy skills.



Rebecca Witte

One “way in” for literacy educators is through coupling literacy methods with critical stance-taking (May, Bingham, & Pendergast, 2014). For example, interactive read alouds serve as a flexible strategy that allows for combination of text and corresponding discussion. Merging a critical race stance, a carefully-selected text, and talk within an interactive read aloud creates a powerful learning tool that is accessible for most teachers. In Figure 1, I use a 3-circle Venn diagram to show how these 3 factors can work together creating an overlapping middle, an area for the most potential learning and growth.

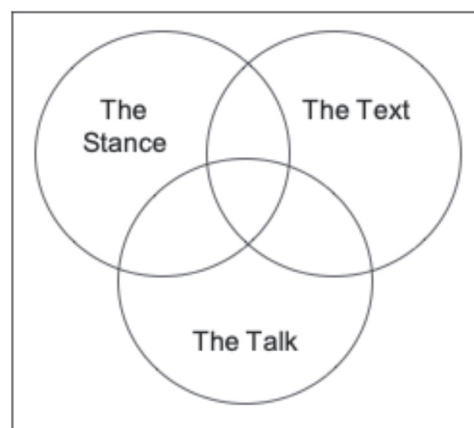


Figure 1. The Center of it All: The Convergence of the Stance, the Text, and the Talk

Before moving on, though, I enter this article with caution, knowing that as a white woman I have much more work to do in interrogating racial power and privilege in my personal life and in my teaching. The fact that I taught in mostly all-white settings, where I rarely brought up conversations of race, reflects the overarching structure of racism in society (Leonardo, 2017). As I write this, I admit I learn and grow along with the reader. I continue to learn how to have careful, deliberate, and ongoing conversations of race within my own (college-level) classrooms. Due to the need for reflexivity, there is a section after each component called “Make it Personal” with resources that have helped me to interrogate my own positionality and complicity in oppression in my personal life and in my teaching.

3 Individual Components: The Stance, The Text, and The Talk

The Stance

Critical stance-taking describes a general orientation or approach to literacy teaching that can be used to examine power structures in regards to gender, race, religion, sexuality, immigration, and other important topics that affect classroom life. While each of these are urgent and vital topics to address, for the sake of this article I specifically take a “critical stance” in regards to discussions of race in the classroom, particularly for white educators and/or predominately white classroom settings. In order to explain what I mean by a critical stance more thoroughly, I will define what “critical” means, then layer on a brief explanation of “critical literacy” and then “critical racial literacy.”

To begin, in many contexts, “critical” means to examine something closely. For our purposes, Muhammad (2020) suggests distinguishing between lower “c” critical and uppercase “C” critical, the former being to think deeply about a topic and the latter being specifically tied to understanding power and oppression. Both types of criticality have merit, but it is the uppercase “C” that asks us to examine power and oppression and to disrupt oppressive structures and systems. Even if you don’t teach Black, Brown, or Indigenous students, teaching capital “C” criticality is vital. In fact, as Muhammad (2020) notes, “Perhaps the people

who need criticality the most become those who share identities with the greatest oppressors of the world” (p. 122). In other words, white students especially need criticality. As those who hold race privilege in society, developing a habit to interrogate systems of power is of utmost importance.

Next, Luke (2000) describes “critical literacy” as reading between and around the text to examine multiple aspects of power. Vasquez, Janks, and Comber (2019) add on this understanding to describe critical literacy as a “way of being and doing” (p. 300). They explain that critical literacy should be viewed as a lens for approaching teaching as a whole. Having a critical stance also means embracing the transformative power of literacy (Vasquez et al., 2019; Rogers, 2018).

Finally, a “critical racial stance” means examining the world through a race lens specifically. It involves examining power structures in society regards to race. For predominately white classrooms, this means delving into what it means to be white, challenging students to take on new perspectives outside their own lived experiences and learning to critique systems to create change (Adu-Gyamfi, Zapata, & Reid, 2021). A critical racial stance would emphasize that racism is both individual and collective, as well as structural and socially constructed. Since racism is structural, it broadly affects all systems in society, which is why a dialogue around power and oppression within specific texts is essential (Muhammad, 2020). Simultaneously, having a critical racial stance calls attention to the importance of understanding one’s positionality in society, which is especially important for people who are white. Due to the hidden nature of whiteness, teaching about race must be explicit in order to disrupt the status quo. Taking that into consideration, a critical racial stance not only acknowledges the existence of racism, but also propels us into commitment and action toward racial justice (Love, 2019).

It is imperative to note that developing a critical racial stance takes time and energy, both personally and professionally. And if you are white, like me, it involves intentional personal introspection into our racialized

identities. A journey toward developing a critical racial stance is not linear. It will, most likely, take time, energy, and practice. To complicate things, in today's current climate of entrenchment in political parties, wariness towards anything outside of one's (white) normative upbringing, and the gross misunderstandings surrounding critical race theory, any discussions of race can be met with hostility. These potential roadblocks may present uncertainty and fear, but awareness may help teachers to navigate these much-needed conversations.

Taking a critical racial stance is not easily described in terms of singular action steps. In many cases, it is going to look different in different contexts. More awareness and intentionality surrounding a critical racial stance will increase the middle on the Venn diagram, allowing more potential space to overlap and create possibilities for growth.

Make it Personal! Educate yourself by reading books related to antiracist teaching, such as Ijeoma Oluo's

(2019) book, *So You Want to Talk about Race* or Bettina Love's (2019) *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. Similarly, Ghoddy Muhammad's (2020), *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* and Matthew Kay's (2018) *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom* provide a practitioner perspective on critical racial literacy to help shape your stance. Table 1 gives a list of other books, websites, and social media resources to raise teachers' awareness of race, both personally and in educational contexts.

The Text

As educators, we understand the potential power of texts. We reach for our favorite texts for their illustrations, rhyme-scheme, or rich dialogue as we mentor students in their own reading and writing. We value texts for their potential to introduce new perspectives and springboard conversations. Reading a text aloud in conjunction with discussion is termed an interactive read aloud. Interactive read alouds are a teaching

Table 1

Additional Resources for Developing a Critical Racial Stance

1. *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* by Austin Channing Brown
2. Black Lives Matter at School: resources, curriculum, and 13 guiding principles for supporting Black and Brown students in the classroom: <https://www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/resources.html>
3. Teaching While White: especially helpful for white teachers who want to learn more about how, "whiteness intersects with antiracist teaching and learning." <https://www.teachingwhilewhite.org/>
4. Learning for Justice: resources, including a list of anti-bias standards are particularly helpful when planning lessons: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/>
5. Rethinking Schools: a publisher of social justice-oriented educational publisher since 1986: <https://rethinkingschools.org/>
6. The Zinn Project: a wealth of resources to use in the classroom and also work toward advocacy on social justice and race-related issues: <https://www.zinnedproject.org/>
7. Teaching on Days After: Dialogue and Resources for Educating Toward Justice: follow this group on Facebook for dialogue and resources.
8. Instagram accounts to follow: *decentertheteacher*, *antiracisteducationnow*, *#abolitionistteachingnetworks*, *teaching_while_white*

strategy in which the teacher reads aloud from a text allowing intentional time to process ideas, discuss, and make connections (Fountas & Pinnell, 2015). For many teachers, this time builds a community of readers and thinkers. And, for some teachers, interactive read aloud time offers a departure from the assigned reading basals, as well as opportunities to discuss texts without the confines of mandated curriculum.

Text selection remains one of the crucial elements of an interactive read aloud. Text complexity, text features, and interdisciplinary themes offer various learning opportunities for students. Choosing appropriate books to scaffold students' abilities is an essential factor to learning. We know from scholars like Sims-Bishop (1990) that books offer a way of being mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors. Put another way, books can be a mirror to reflect the experiences of those in the text with the reader. They can be a window opening up perspectives to learn about others. But books can also serve as a sliding glass door in that they can cause a change in perspective and serve as a critical reflection (Thorton, 2018). Selective text choices allow students to draw personal connections to the text in culturally relevant ways (May et al., 2014; Peterson & Chamberlain, 2015). A well-chosen text can spark discussion or offer an opportunity to empathize with characters outside of lived experiences. In many cases, multicultural texts can shed light on underrepresented viewpoints or provide alternative perspectives. In addition to these considerations, research has shown that purposeful texts allow for the extension of students' understanding of topics of social justice and race (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2021; Labadie, Wetzell, & Rogers, 2012; Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

On the other hand, teachers need to be careful when selecting multicultural literature. In their research, Rodriguez and Vickery (2021) note that selecting texts without criticality can instill stereotypes. Additionally, they note that just because a book represents a "diverse" perspective, doesn't mean it is authentic to the lived experiences of people of color or is used to uplift marginalized voices. Teachers need to go beyond the surface level of the text to determine whether a text interrupts or reinforces dangerous stereotypes. Keeping this in

mind, developing a critical racial stance alongside text selection may help reduce the tendency to select texts that oversimplify race or address race or racism in problematic ways (Rodriguez & Vickery, 2021). Critically evaluating representation of race in a text means reading and examining the text through a lens of power, inequity, and oppression. It involves questioning and "reading between the lines" (Luke, 2000).

Make it Personal! If you find that your favorite, "tried and true" texts emphasize predominantly white perspectives, consider texts that offer the same literacy benefit while also prioritizing the perspectives of authors or characters of color. Look to award lists like Coretta Scott King Award (<https://www.ala.org/rt/emiert/cskbookawards>) or peruse the resources in Table 2. #weneeddiversebooks or the www.colorsofus.com are examples of places on social media and the web to find diverse texts. You might consider setting a goal to replace one book per literacy unit or marking period. Lastly, read widely yourself. The more you read texts that represent racial perspectives that are different from your own, the more comfortable you will be using them in the classroom.

The Talk

Dialogue plays an essential role in interactive read alouds. The benefits of classroom discussion are well-cited (Nystrand, 2006; Wilkinson & Son, 2011), and within an interactive read aloud, dialogue is pivotal to the development of literacy skills and social awareness (Lobron & Selman, 2007). Through discussion of texts, students are able to pose questions and rethink positions (Laman, 2006). Due to the role of conversation as a meaning-making process, students were more able to recognize injustices (Kemmerlin, 2020), recognize race/whiteness (Rogers & Mosley, 2006), and build awareness around social issues and consider the perspectives of others (Peterson & Chamberlain, 2015).

Kay (2019) offers considerations for facilitating discussions about race in the classroom. He asks teachers to reconsider "one-off" conversations about race or any conversation that is meant for shock value. Instead, he advocates for conversations of race throughout the

Table 2

Resources for selecting high-quality literature

1. Social Justice Books: This website's mission is the promotion of multicultural and social justice children's books for teachers and parents: <https://socialjusticebooks.org/>
2. We Are Teachers: <https://www.weareteachers.com/books-about-social-justice/>
3. We Need Diverse Books: a blog, programs, resources, and book lists that focus on reflecting and honoring the lives of young people: <https://diversebooks.org/>
4. Lee & Low Books: publishing house dedicated to publishing multicultural books for every child: <https://www.leeandlow.com/>
5. The Conscious Kid: an education, research and policy organization: <https://www.theconsciouskid.org/>
6. The Coretta Scott King Book Award List: <https://www.ala.org/rt/emiert/cskbookawards>
7. #ownvoices or #weneeddiversebooks: useful hashtags to find books written from historically marginalized or underrepresented viewpoints.
8. We Are Lit: a local Black-owned bookstore in Grand Rapids, Michigan: <https://wearelitgr.com>.

year to take time to build relationships with students. Regular interactive read alouds that explore race and racism would allow for consistent and careful integration, rather than a one-time event.

The talk can happen in a variety of ways from scaffolded Accountable Talk (Alexander, 2010; Michaels, O'Conner, Hall, & Resnick, 2010), to an organized discussion using a template (Kesler, Mills, & Reilly, 2020), to a turn and talk or stop and jot. Accountable Talk describes a comprehensive approach used to structure rigorous discussion in the classroom. Although there is more to be said about the benefits of Accountable Talk, for this article, the talking stems alone are powerful tools to aid in class discussion. By using strategies like talking stems, teachers model "talk moves" that aid in advancing productive conversation. For instance, "Can you build on X's thinking?" Students are taught to expand, agree, disagree, and connect to classmates' thoughts and ideas. These thinking stems may help helpful in discussing race-related concepts like bias and stereotyping.

Kesler et al., (2020) suggest using a planning template

to prepare for discussion. The template serves as a lesson plan of sorts. Within the template are places to highlight the purpose of the text, key vocabulary, places to stop within the text, and discussion structures or possible prompt. This planning tool may be especially helpful to teachers who are new or nervous about facilitating a race-related discussion.

For those who prefer something less structured, a simple prompt like, "What is going on here?" (Labadie et al., 2012) can open up a line of dialogue with students. Or, Rogers & Mosely (2006) use critical literacy prompts to draw students' attention to the text. For instance, "What surprised you about the book?" or "Who is in charge or has the power in the book? How do you do know?" (p. 494). (See Appendix C). Another discussion possibility is to think about how specific characters in the text align with the roles of allies, bystanders, targets, and perpetrators (Christianson, 2004; Laman, 2006). Research also suggests that following the students' lead and allowing their authentic contributions and connections to guide discussion makes the interactive read aloud real and relevant (Peterson & Chamberlain, 2015).

In the end, each participation structure provides an avenue for students to demonstrate their critical ways of thinking about a topic. In the section below, called *Putting it all Together*, I apply various techniques to pose questions about specific poems from *Can I Touch Your Hair?: A Conversation* (Latham & Waters, 2019).

Make it Personal! One of the contours of whiteness is a reluctance for white people to see, much less talk about, race (Leonardo, 2017). Entering and facilitating discussion of race will be easier if you have had some experience engaging in critical discussions about race and racism yourself. Many white teachers try to find critical friends, other teachers or staff members in their buildings, or even online forums for opportunities to discuss texts and share ideas that explore race and racism.

Putting it All Together

As a way to illustrate the strategy of merging the stance, the text, and the talk, I apply the strategies I have described to planning for an interactive read aloud focused on the book *Can I Touch your Hair?: A Conversation* (Latham & Waters, 2019).

1. **Select a Text:** *Can I Touch Your Hair?: A Conversation* by Irene Latham and Charles Waters (2019) is written as a series of poems creating a narrative that explores the thoughts and feelings of two classmates, a Black boy and a white girl. In many poems, their perspectives are juxtaposed within the same topic or theme. This book is a natural fit for students in grades 3–6, as it leans into issues associated with this age group like self-identity, family life, and friendships, while also exploring issues of race and racial identity. From a teacher perspective, this text offers flexibility to focus on one particular poem or look at the poems as a collective story. In regards to critical racial literacy, the book opens up opportunities for perspective-taking along racial lines, questioning assumptions and stereotypes, and “reading between the lines” (Luke, 2000). Additionally, for white students, the text allows for reflexivity in the character of Irene and getting to know a new perspective in Charles.
2. **Pick a Discussion Strategy:** This is largely based

on teaching style and the goals for the lesson. Here are some suggestions mentioned:

- **Accountable Talk** (Alexander, 2010; Michaels et al., 2010). Pose a question and invite students to use sentence stems to extend the conversation. For instance, when the white character, Irene, learns about the history of white oppression, she writes a note of apology to a classmate. Ask the class, “Is that enough? What could she have done differently?” Invite students to agree, disagree or build on one another’s thoughts and ideas.
 - **Prompts.** You can design text-specific questions or ask broader questions like, “What is happening in this poem?” “Who holds the power in the story? How do you know?” (Rogers and Mosley, 2006). Or, “What mistakes were made?”
 - **Perspective-Taking.** Ask, “Why would each character have a different perspective on the same situation? What are some things that the characters learned about each other? How did each character grow? What mistakes were made?”
3. **Identify stopping points to address key concepts and pose questions:** See Table 3 for possibilities.

Learning Between Two Factors is Not Enough

The Text and the Stance

As the vignette (or lack thereof) at the beginning suggests, the intersection of the text and critical racial literacy stance provides exposure to literature, but lacks opportunities for students to achieve deep understanding and connections. Reading books centering race may be better than nothing, but it loses its value without the rich discussion that *the talk* provides. Without the discussion, the text and subsequent learning could come off as neutral, thus running the risk of perpetuating whiteness (Leonardo, 2017).

The Talk and the Stance

A thought-provoking discussion centered around racial justice issues can happen at any grade level. Making connections to current events and personal experience

Table 3

Possible Poems, Concepts, and Questions to address in Can I Touch your Hair? (Latham & Waters, 2019)

Poem	Concepts	Potential Questions
"Hair" and "Strands"	Self-Identity Microaggressions	How does Irene feel about her hair? How does Charles feel about a classmate touching his hair? What is a microaggression, have you ever heard of that? What does it mean? Why might it be a microaggression to touch someone's hair?
"Church" and "Sunday Service"	Segregation Structural Racism	How is church described differently in these two poems? At the end of "Church," the last line states, "At church everyone is white". Are there places that you go that are filled with all white people? Or all black people? Where? Why do you think there is a separation?
"Beach Day" and "Beach"	Self-identity	Describe the kids that are teasing Charles? What does the poem say their hair is like? Do you know what the word <i>appropriation</i> means? How are the kids appropriating Charles? How does Irene feel about her skin? How does that compare to how Charles feels about himself?
"The Athlete"	Stereotyping	Why do the kids assume that Charles likes basketball? Why don't they assume that he loves to read? What makes people think like this? Can someone describe what they know about a stereotype? What stereotypes do you think people might have about you? How do you feel about those stereotypes?
"Apology"	Learning about oppression Taking action	How does Irene feel when she learns of Shonda's family tree? What does she do? Is that enough? What could Irene do next?

“Officer Brassard” and “News”	Police Brutality	<p>What is Charles seeing on the news about police officers? What is his own experience with Officer Brassard? Why is he conflicted?</p> <p>What have you seen on the news? Irene’s dad talks to her about what happened to Trayvon. Do you know what happened to Trayvon Martin? George Floyd?</p>
“Sleepover” and “Why Aunt Sarah Doesn’t Go Downtown After Dark”	Implicit Bias	<p>Why do you think Charles’ parents won’t let him go for a sleepover at his cousin’s house?</p> <p>Why do you think Aunt Sarah is fearful? Does she have a reason to be afraid? Do you know what bias means? Do you have bias? Can you name one? Why is understanding bias important?</p>

may extend students’ knowledge of issues and topics. That said, it is the addition of the text that provides an infusion of literacy skills like vocabulary, prior knowledge, and comprehension that amplifies literacy learning potential.

The Talk and the Text

When used in combination, the talk and text together create powerful learning opportunities. The discussion around texts with interactive read alouds is already highly researched (Barrentine, 1996; Hoffman, 2011). One of the noted benefits of an interactive read aloud is the scaffolding of learning that takes place in conjunction with text. Because of this, infusing themes of racial literacy into an already powerful approach enhances students’ ability to empathize, and discern issues with the help of the text and teacher.

The three circle diagram in Figure 1 is a powerful visual that helps to orient why the talk, the text, and the stance are equally important. A critical race-oriented interactive read aloud centers all three equally important components: the careful selection of a text, the dialogue guided by the teacher, and the critical racial stance. Incorporating these three factors in the literacy classroom can offer a range of possibilities.

Closing Thoughts

As I noted at the beginning, I regret missing opportunities to have critical racial conversations in my classroom. Through subsequent learning and critical stance-taking, I have become more intentional about addressing race and racism in my own teaching, but I still admit that I have much more to learn. Through this process, it is important for teachers to be kind to themselves, because we will not get it right all the time. As Tisby (2021) quotes, “Perfection on race is not a requirement for progress, but honesty is” (p. 100). I would encourage white teachers to keep learning about how both privilege and oppression affects them, both personally and professionally, and then find ways to incorporate topics of race and injustice into their literacy instruction.

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