

# First Graders and Fairy Tales: One Teacher's Action Research of Critical Literacy

Ryan T. Bourke

Fostering a critical stance in very young readers can have surprising results, for both children and teachers.

“I’m finished writing, Mr. Bourke!” exclaimed Jonathan, a 6-year-old boy in my first grade class (student names are pseudonyms). Grasped in his outstretched hand was his proud rendition of the Sleeping Beauty story. As I read Jonathan’s version, I smiled at his unorthodox conclusion:

The cen gav her dat woo I dont loc csing I was bater uslep. Suo da arogd and aguy

[The king gave her that (referring to the kiss). “Woo, I don’t like kissing. I was better asleep.” So they argued and argued.]

“Jonathan,” I asked, “will you tell me about your ending?”

He replied, “OK. I think Sleeping Beauty don’t want no one kissing her to wake her up! In my version, the princess tells the king what she thinks, ‘Don’t you kiss me!’ She don’t want to be kissed. She likes sleepin’ better.”

“Why do they argue?” I inquired.

“They arguing ’cause the king, he want to kiss the, umm, kiss her, but she don’t want that. They have to fight.” Jonathan’s tone had become serious as he explained his reasoning. I carefully jotted down his words, intent to document the critical literacy event that was occurring before me.

My students often astound me with their acuity; however, that afternoon I was pleased not only with Jonathan’s insight, but also with how, embedded within his act of literacy, there existed elements of critical literacy. Jonathan had approached this

writing project from a new perspective—a critical perspective. He had interrupted the normalcy of the happy ending and succeeded in reconceptualizing this familiar story.

In the following pages, I detail the struggles—victories and defeats included—as my students and I wrestled with the implications of adopting critical literacy. In an effort to honor my students’ preferred genre, I had introduced this previously absent practice via unorthodox critical literacy texts: fairy tales. I had assumed that my students would embrace critical literacy as they read, wrote, spoke, listened, and thought; after all, if I could create the space for critical literacy to operate, then so too could my students. This “space,” as I was soon to discover, was not easily filled with critical literacy practices. Rather, it became a place in which several obstructions were made manifest. Critical literacy, therefore, took root not in the filling in of available opportunities, but in the deconstruction of those obstacles that hindered its inception. One purpose of this article is to convey to educators how my critical literacy endeavor was instrumental in exposing the tacit undercurrents of my students’ literacy lives. The other purpose, and perhaps most important, is to demonstrate how I as a teacher learned to don a critical lens that allowed me to “read between the lines” of the literacy practices of my 21 first-grade students.

Critical literacy, as I illustrate in this article, is the act of approaching texts wearing a set of eyeglasses through which the reader examines and questions the familiar and comfortable (Jones, 2006). It is the process of problematizing texts to expose privilege and oppression; it reveals how texts benefit some people and harm others. Critical literacy recognizes that all texts position the reader; it proposes that multiple perspectives exist, many of which contest

the sovereignty of author and text. Most important, critical literacy lends itself to social action and the creation of a better, more just world (DeVoogd, 2006; Powell, Cantrell, & Adams, 2001). Shannon (1991) stated that “a critical view of reality challenges the injustices and inequalities of the status quo by asking the question ‘Why are things the way they are?’” (p. 518). In all, the critical reader not only renegotiates texts but also the world in which he or she is situated—an immense task for both teacher and first grader.

## Disrupting the *Three Billy Goats Gruff*: The First Attempts at Critical Literacy in My Classroom

We all know the story of the Three Billy Goats Gruff, and in retrospect, so did my students—or so they thought. Little did they realize that by questioning and exposing the “ulterior motives and below-surface ideas” (Ciardiello, 2004, p. 138) privileged in the words and illustrations, their views of the hoofed heroes were about to change. Little did I realize that my role as a teacher was also about to change. I began to identify my first-grade students as the educators, myself as the learner, and fairy tales as the catalyst to a new curriculum. I connected then with the practices of Paulo Freire (2000), the Brazilian educator commonly associated with critical literacy, when he said, “The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and reconsiders his earlier considerations as the students express their own” (p. 68).

I also contemplated the methods by which to introduce my students to an investigative way of thinking. To do so would require that my reading instruction evolve beyond the alphabets, fluency, and comprehension advocated by the Report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Compton-Lilly (2004) suggested that formal schooling reinforces the assumption of reading as the mastery of discrete skills. I had hoped that the reading of this fairy tale, and the others to follow, would challenge such assumptions and expose my students to a frame of mind that could ultimately change not only how they approached literature but also how they perceived the

world around them. My goal as an educator would be to implement into my pedagogy a repertoire of critical thinking. The only question was how?

I had previously emphasized reading as the process of understanding the author’s message. Conversations with my students would often incorporate the occasional “I think the author is telling me...” or “The author’s message is....” I had used these strategies as methods to hold students accountable to the text and as a way in which to assess their comprehension. During this first reading, I became aware that if I were to teach critical literacy and instill in my students the habit of recognizing and questioning how language contributes to injustice (Comber, 1998), I would have to reconsider the aforementioned approach. Recognizing the importance for critical readers to question (Simpson, 1996), it seemed antithetical for my students to merely understand the author’s message without interrogation. When students question texts as well as their experiences and beliefs, they are engaging in deeper practices of critique and analysis; likewise, when students learn to read critically, the author’s message becomes available for new interpretation; alternative explanations are then made possible (Leland, Harste, & Huber, 2005).

With the commencement of the *Three Billy Goats Gruff* read-aloud, so began the onslaught of comments. Jonathan declared, “The troll is mean, mean, mean!” In response, I posed my first question: “Why is the troll so mean?” I was immediately dealt many responses, all of which positioned the troll as the villain. This was a question they could all answer, and the eagerness before me was all too familiar. I was left to speculate: Why do teachers ask what students already know?

Michael declared that the troll was a monster. Malik stated that “trolls are just mean, just because trolls are trolls.” Alyssa commented that “trolls don’t like nobody.” The consensus was final: The troll was the bad guy, and the goats were the good guys. Although the students had understood the author’s message, my question had failed to elicit deeper thinking. How was I going to confront what I had so adamantly taught before? And how was I to challenge a genre in which the concept of good and bad had become so ingrained?

My second query was, “Why did the author *make* the troll so mean?” The students were silent. Several children giggled. Then James responded, “To make the story more interesting. You know, if the troll was

nice, he would let them get grass on the other side. The story would be boring.” His voice trailed off as he stretched out the word *boring*. He had captured a valid point but had neglected to question it. I continued, “How do you think the goats feel?” Some answers included “sad,” “not happy,” “scared,” and “hungry”—all typical first-grade responses. Then I asked, “How do you think the troll feels?” There were no answers, and the looks of surprise, coupled with the groans of discontent, communicated the students’ conviction that one should not elicit information regarding the emotional status of the “bad guy.” Only the good guy counts.

As we read on, stopping intermittently to discuss the events of the story and to ask an occasional question, I noticed that as the story accumulated, the students’ excitement level increased. They were anticipating the grand finale when the large Billy Goat knocks the troll into the river below. It was inevitable that good would triumph over evil, not to mention that justice would be served upon the troll. At this point, I felt no other option would satisfy my students. In their minds, the only suitable and acceptable conclusion was images of the evil troll kicking and screaming as the waters swept this antagonist (along with all the troubles of the world) away from the goats forever. My mind, however, was searching for ways in which to usurp the predominant axiom of fairy tale architecture, the one that so aptly defines the ways things should be.

Of course, upon the father goat’s safe and happy reunion with his family, there was a round of applause. Alyssa, who had listened intently the entire time, commented, “I knew that was going to happen!” Interestingly, most of my students, while from the beginning very aware of the outcome of the book, appeared somewhat relieved. Perhaps the questions I had posed had made them uncomfortable; perhaps I had momentarily disrupted that which, in the words of James, had made the story “more interesting.” If my questions that morning had evoked in my students a premonition of how their reading was to be transformed, they were correct; however, not much had happened yet. Regardless of the fact that my students’ worries had been alleviated, I remained unsettled.

And so went my first attempts at critical literacy: I would ask a question, and the students would respond. Their reactions, while thoughtful at times, were often unsuccessful in establishing much

distance from the author as the authority. The students were taking for face value that which the text presented. They were resistant to accept any other possibilities.

## The Gap, the Good Guys, and the Grass: The Birth of Critical Literacy in My Classroom

As the dialogues transpired, I began to liken my role as teacher to that of a bridge over which my students could cross in their progression from readers who accepted text as it was to readers who questioned text on a regular basis. I could not assume that the boys and girls in my class never challenged texts, but in regard to this fairy tale, it appeared as if it were my responsibility to help eradicate the troll from the bridge and allow them passage. One way to accomplish this would be to familiarize them with and support them in the process of asking deeper and more pertinent questions. I had discovered previously that my class was competent at and rather enjoyed using the strategy of putting oneself in the character’s shoes. I decided, amidst cheers and applause, that the following day I would facilitate questioning that would require my students to resituate themselves in the individual perspectives of the characters. I hoped that from a different point of view they would be able to examine the situation from each character’s unique position. The students could then connect with the goats and perhaps even the troll.

The next day, it happened. At the end of the second reading, Nicholas contributed an interesting observation: “Why did the Daddy Gruff and Mommy Goat send Baby Gruff first? I wouldn’t do that!” This question demonstrated to me that children, even as young as 6 years old, are capable of engaging in habits as critical readers. All I had done was to ask my class to view the situation from a different point of view—one small request. Nicholas, on the other hand, by empathizing with a character other than those framed as most important, had reconsidered the element of justice as presented in the story—a monumental accomplishment for critical literacy.

I jumped at this opportunity and with renewed enthusiasm continued to probe: “Would anyone else like to put themselves in the characters’ shoes?” The students’ responses were affirmative. My students discussed issues concerning the welfare of the goats,

ultimately deciding that they would have done things differently had they been Daddy Gruff. Indeed, it was neither fair nor just that the weaker and less capable characters had been sent first. Finally, I asked, “If you were the troll, how would you feel?” Most of the class remained silent, as they had the previous day, but one response from Jennifer further fueled the sparks of critical reading—sparks that were to consume some former reading habits. “Sad. I think he feels sad. It’s not, it’s not really fair for the troll. The three goats all got to eat the grass, but the troll is hungry. Why can’t he eat, too?” This was an excellent observation that even I had neglected to consider.

Like the goats, my students began to timidly trip-trap across the bridge that separated one world from the next. They were beginning to cross “boundaries and recognize that there are entire other worlds of meaning, depending on how they look at things” (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 51). As I closed the pages on the bucolic scene of three goats grazing happily, my students left the once cozy and tranquil reading area disconcerted, uneasy, and in state of disequilibrium. Two young classmates had forever disrupted the issues of the gap, the good guys, and the grass. Before long, many others would join the ranks of first-grade critical readers.

## Critical Literacy and Colors: Darkness as Evil

Two distinct versions of Little Red Riding Hood presented the Wolf as a malevolent character lurking in the woods. Both renditions, however, provided my students with opposing portrayals of the wilderness through which the young girl must pass. One presented the woods as dark and uninviting, while the other, less morose version, depicted the forest as friendly and attractive. I did not dispute that the antagonist was indeed awful; I did, however, interrogate the unquestioning use of darkness to equate black with evil and how students might cross-contextualize this notion from one text to another (i.e., from the fairy tale text to the text of their lives).

Research indicates that the way children see themselves in books affects their identity formation (Hurley, 2005). I was suspicious that the concept that darkness is evil might contribute to the construction of deficit-based subjectivities, not in how my students saw themselves within the text, but in how they saw

themselves positioned relative to dominant culture. As such, I sought to disclose how the proclivity of fairy tales to portray darkness as synonymous with evil could perpetuate constructs of white superiority, especially because my children were all of non-European descent. Leland, Harste, and Huber (2005) illustrated how first-grade students tackled texts that explicitly articulated social inequities; I wanted my students to tackle the clandestine reifications of oppression as they subtly exist in fairy tales. If critical literacy could expose such insidious ideologies from the pages of a supposedly benign genre, it might also provide my students the opportunity to recognize and deconstruct the similarly covert narratives of mainstream society.

The transcripts of the readings and discussions of Little Red Riding Hood revealed that my students accepted the synonymy of darkness and evil as the way things are, the status quo. They were unable (or unwilling) to discern one author’s pastoral depiction of the woods as simply the dwelling grounds of a bad wolf from the other author’s depiction of the woods as a dark place lacking light in which *inevitably* a bad wolf (or a villain in general) must reside. The dark version prompted discussions of evil, while the more colorful and inviting portrayal elicited much different conversations—ones that focused on the superficial aspects of the tale. For example, Kiera noted that Little Red Riding Hood’s location was different: “She is not on the path. She is in a garden.” When I directed their attention to the difference between versions, the darkness issue became paramount:

- Mr. Bourke: What do you notice about the difference between the woods in this story [pointing to the friendlier portrayal] compared with the woods in the other story?
- Dante: It’s different colors.
- Rosemary: It’s pretty.
- Mr. Bourke: How does this make you feel? [pointing to the depiction of the dark woods]
- Dante: Scared.
- Several students: Sad.
- Tanaj: Scared...because I see a fox on the path (referring to the wolf).
- Dante: Because she’s in the woods.
- Allison: It’s really dark there...it’s really dark.
- Kiera: It’s scary.

There is something to be said for teaching children the wisdom of not “straying from the path,” however, looking at this concept from a critical literacy perspective, it becomes apparent that neglecting to teach students to question the dark-is-evil/white-is-good notion can have far-reaching consequences in the way they interpret texts. Below is an excerpt of a later transcript of a reading of Cinderella in which the concept of black and white as associated with evil and good surfaces once again.

Jennifer: In that story, the godmother is white, and the woods is black...in that story the fairies have white clothes and the witches have black clothes.

Mr. Bourke: Remember how we talked about the beginning of the other Cinderella...and if characters are supposed to be nice, they are dressed in white, and if characters are supposed to be bad, they are dressed in black?

Michael: Black–white, they’re opposite.

I was particularly impressed with the ability of some students to refer to other texts and draw comparisons between the two. Michael’s summation: “Black–white. They’re opposite,” confirmed my suspicions: My students were deciding on good and evil simply by the colors presented in the illustrations, an unfortunate characteristic of not only fairy tales, but also many children’s texts and films. Reading fairy tales without disrupting the black–white dichotomy, would do nothing more than reinforce the mainstream ideologies so often privileged in texts. Consider the following excerpts of discussion that occurred only days after the Little Red Riding Hood readings. Here, not only is yellow (whiteness) equated with good but also with beauty:

Mr. Bourke: Why would you say she is beautiful?

Jennifer: Because she has a yellow...she has hair that’s beautiful and a dress that’s beautiful.

Mr. Bourke: Take a look at the stepmother and the stepsisters. Would you say they are beautiful?

All: No.

Unknown: ‘Cause they’re mean.

Mr. Bourke: Do you know they are mean just by looking at this picture?

Michael: ‘Cause you know, you know why? ‘Cause these two have the dark colors on their dress and this one has light colors. And these two, and these two are peach, I mean these two are, you know, these two are tan and this one is peach (referring to the white Cinderella).

Mr. Bourke: Their skin you mean?

Michael: [agrees] Uh-huh.

James: That the, that this, that their color of their dress is really dark so that doesn’t make them really nice. And this one has a gold color which makes it really beautiful.

While engaging my children in the above discussion, I became very apprehensive with the direction the conversation had turned. Here, before my class, sat a presumably innocent, benign, and harmless text. The fact that my 6- and 7-year-old students had identified and accepted as fact that which the illustrations suggested, while entirely neglecting to question the framing of dark as evil and light skin as beauty, was of major concern. This issue proved to be most difficult to confront. I wrestled face-to-face with the issue of color as synonymous with concepts of evil, good, and beauty. I wanted them to “stray from the path,” so to speak; to break the association of darkness with evil, of beauty with whiteness, and to begin considering alternative possibilities in which a character who is ugly could be good, and a character who is dark could be beautiful.

In an attempt to amend this mindset and to equip my students with a critical lens with which to confront such pervasive constructions of goodness and beauty, I seized every opportunity to combat the opponent. It was not sufficient that I expose my students to multiple versions of fairy tales (including disruptive renditions); I had to teach them to argue with texts. By instigating conflict with both characters and authors, my students engaged in critical altercations that foregrounded many of the assumed normalities of fairy tales. Most important, the students questioned their lack of representation within fairy tales, refusing to allow authors to use skin color as a tool to characterize one’s nature. As my students resituated their interpretations within the interstices of the

black–white, beautiful–ugly binaries, they began to interpret texts in a deeply personal context that embraced not only their personal experiences but also their unique attributes. I wanted nothing to debase my students’ identities as children of darker complexion—children who are grossly unrepresented in most texts, children who are equally worthy of depictions of beauty and benevolence. If I could arrest, in the smallest degree, the cycle of color discrimination that could potentially transfer to more realistic texts, including the unwritten texts that perpetuate white privilege, then critical literacy could serve a purpose far greater than I had ever imagined. And here, right before me, first-grade students had begun to embody critical practices that could accomplish just that.

## Critical Literacy and Rules: An Adversary

Following a reading of Jack and the Beanstalk, the question “Could things have happened differently?” arose. A discussion of whether Jack should have returned the beans and reacquired his cow prompted James to articulate an obstacle that had been rearing its ugly head from the very beginning:

That if I were the man, I would not give the cow to Jack because he, because I traded the beans to him... because rules are rules. He gave me some[thing], he gave me a cow, and I gave him beans, so *rules are rules* (emphasis mine).

The certainty with which James arrived at his conclusion, *rules are rules*, illustrated the class consensus in general concerning the authority of rules. It was quite beyond James to accept an alternative version of Jack and the Beanstalk in which Jack returns the beans. For him, “rules [were] rules,” and no matter what ill fortune may occur otherwise, to transgress authority was not acceptable, nor was it allowed. I suspected that the concept of absolutism (e.g., black is black and white is white; good is good and evil is evil) played the role of the adversary in terms of children’s ability to look critically at texts. Bryan (2005) said that “in the land of ‘once upon a time,’ issues are never clouded” (p. 5). James’s comment demonstrated this argument quite strongly. For him, changing the outcome of the story was unjustified if it meant a minor shift in what is right or wrong. Jack was right and the giant was wrong—final and unclouded. It is with this unfortunate propensity of

fairy tales to promote absolutism that I found myself in opposition. And I was up for quite the battle.

According to Finn (1999), the discourse of some schools is one contributor to the ways children resist the notion of challenging authority. Most often, students view the teacher as the authority, the one who holds the knowledge and the one from whom knowledge is obtained. To challenge or question the teacher, or other school-valued authorities such as texts, is perceived as a step out of line, an epistemological “stepping on toes.” What is often neglected is how children transfer this inherent acceptance of “the ways things should be,” to texts. The *rules are rules* comment illustrated quite conclusively an issue I had faced from the very beginning, a term I have coined as the *rule of text*: the perception that text is authoritative and final and an underlying belief that suppresses the reader’s license to challenge, question, deconstruct, and rewrite the assumptions, beliefs, ideologies, and concepts embedded, whether implicitly or not, within the perspective of the text. For my students, the rule of text was further perpetuated as a yearning to see the story conclude *only as it should*.

Discussing and creating alternative endings for Jack and the Beanstalk problematized the right-or-wrong duality. What was once upon a time so clear-cut became vague. The students and I had swung open the door to include the possibility that a *good* character may have committed a wrongdoing. Despite this conceptual ambiguity, when I attempted to address the consequences of Jack’s actions and explore other possible reconciliations, my students would not concede. For them, the identifying of Jack committing a minor infraction, such as disobeying his mother, was merely incidental. To suggest otherwise—that he shouldn’t have disobeyed his poor mother, and that in doing so everything could have been avoided (including the death of the giant)—was tantamount to murder (literally the murder of the giant). Furthermore, Jack not only disobeys his mom, but he also proceeds to engage in several clearly wrongful and criminal activities, all of which my students shrugged off as merely collateral damage. The culmination of the story with the death of the villain, as had been the case also in *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, as well as the assurance that the good guys lived happily (and richly) ever after, was sufficient to warrant whatever exploit necessary, regardless of its rightness or wrongness. Several statements reflect this notion:

Giovanni: If, if I was Jack, and the man gave me the beans, I'd say, "no forget about it. That cost me 200 dollars" ...and I'd just chase him and steal my cow.

Jennifer: If I were Jack, I would take his beans. I would say to him I want the beans but not give the cow...first give me the beans... I would trick him and take the beans and run away.

We discussed these wrong activities as a class. No matter what, the consensus was that Jack was right, the giant wrong, and the rule of the text should

*I recognized that by inviting the discourse of my students into the stories, my students could exercise some command over text.*

prevail. The beans were paramount to the conclusion of the story and when a happy ending is to come, it shall come by whatever means necessary.

I was compelled at this point, no matter how futile it seemed, to present to my young readers the possibility that the giant was not bad but merely a character subjected to wrongdoing.

In doing so, I engaged critical literacy to ask questions about "language and power, about people and lifestyle, about morality and ethics, about who is advantaged by the way things are and who is disadvantaged" (Comber, 1998, p. 8). Would I be capable of breaking the rules, to depart from the mainstream perspective of this text, and persuade my students to see things from the giant's point of view? Could I expose the adversarial tendencies of children's texts, especially proliferated by the very nature of fairy tales, and allow critical literacy to define itself in the literacy lives of my students? No. As it turned out, I was not capable of filling such a tall order, but the students—through their self-authored fairy tales—were.

## Critical Literacy and Authority: The Discourse of Power

Gee (2004) defined discourse as a "distinctive way to use language integrated with 'other stuff'" (p. 46). The other stuff in the discourse with which children approach texts is complex and, in my opinion, often disregarded. Included in student discourse is

evidence of ideologies of religion, justice, ethics, and individual and societal responsibility, to name only a few. After several occurrences in which such other stuff surfaced, I realized that not only did fairy tales often align themselves to pertinent childhood issues, but they also provided an opportunity for children to engage in discursive interactions in which critical literacy could occur. I recognized that by inviting the discourse of my students into the stories, my students could exercise some command over text.

One such discourse was that of power. My students began to notice how power plays a role in the actions of the characters. This was particularly evident during a later reading of Rumpelstiltskin. The following excerpt of conversation informed me of the sensitivity of children to the issues of power and authority:

Mr. Bourke: [reading voice of Rumpelstiltskin] Now give me what you promised me!

Unknown: Oooh!

Allison: She doesn't have to give away the baby to him because she's the Queen and she says what to do.

Similar statements had occurred from the very beginning of my research, although I had identified this as contrary to the critical approach I was attempting to teach. My students' willingness to extend power to the marginalized characters continually propagated the happily ever after theme. To turn the tables on the distribution of power, I introduced the concept of power-as-a-writer by introducing a self-authored version of the Three Billy Goats Gruff. In this version, I subtly vilified the father goat by focusing on his insensitivity in sending the feeble and weaker family members over the bridge first. This time, I incorporated Malik's "just because trolls are trolls" hypothesis and granted no mercy to the two smaller goats. I also used Nicholas's observation regarding the unnecessary sending of the baby first. In the end, the widowed father goat is left wondering why he hadn't crossed first. After I was subjected to a brief homily regarding story etiquette, I granted my students the right to write. The moment I equipped my students with the power to create their own texts, and in doing so, insert their discourses into their renditions, a noticeable shift occurred in the way their stories depicted authority. Below is a condensed version of

Michael's first of three Three Billy Goats Gruff stories in which an unfortunate end befalls the troll.

One day dady gruff broght a lazergun...the brige was gared by a big ugly trol...dady gruf shot him...his butt was on fire he fell into the water the end.

The proceeding version was significantly less bellicose, depicting three "Billy Trols Gruff" attempting to cross a bridge guarded by a goat. The goat is knocked off the bridge, slapped by a fish, and chased away by the three trolls. The final and most aberrant version is presented in his composition entitled "the 3 Billy gots gruf."

Wonce upoan a time thar was 3 billy gots gruf. They wear vare hugre. Thay had to cross a brige gared by a man aeting troll. But the troll wonted 3 pet gots and the gots wonted one pet troll. So they bcame frends. The end.

When my students were granted agency to adjust factions of power, their fairy tale renditions resonated with evidence of critical thinking—thinking that was to extend into other areas of curriculum. As we read other genres, my students transferred their critical skills and began to discern the inequities present in various text types, deconstructing them in their conversations and writing. Fairy tales had been the medium through which critical literacy was introduced; however, in time, many genres would be made vulnerable to the critical gaze of my first-grade students.

## Critical Literacy: A Challenge to Educators

I cannot conclude this piece "happily ever after"—doing so would suggest that all has been done that can be done. Rather, I urge other educators to sow the critical seeds that have the potential to grow, like Jack's beanstalk, and transcend the clouds that obscured much of my first-grade students' desire to disrupt normalcy. If this piece compels teachers to stray from the path of what traditionally counts as literacy in early childhood classrooms and experiment, as I did, in a realm so few dare tread, it is entirely possible for transformations akin to Cinderella's pumpkin coach to transpire. It is my hope that, because of teachers everywhere, the obstacles that limited my attempts at critical literacy will continue to fade as

students far and wide acquire a lens through which to critically examine texts.

As Jonathan poignantly illustrated in the opening scenario, there is occasionally no choice but to put up a fight. Like the king and princess in his story, my class of first-grade students often found themselves in situations where they too "[had] to fight." Their efforts to recognize and challenge the assumptions so entrenched in the fairy tale genre were critical literacy at its best. In a time when reading instruction is more focused on the teaching of basic literacy skills (Allington, 2001), our timeliness at recognizing and challenging inadequate constructions of literacy could not be more imperative. Jones (2006) states, in regard to progressive classrooms, that

students are not learning to be text analysts; they are not questioning power relations in the text, stereotypes that are reproduced through text, the multiple ways in which a text could have been constructed, and the ways in which a text positions different readers. (p. 114)

One need only fathom the potential material consequences of a transformed curriculum to insist that critical literacy be included in everyday classroom pedagogy. That my first-grade students could grant the troll due process and trouble the notion of good and evil within a discourse of equality portends the potential of critical literacy to be reified in future classrooms, playgrounds, and work sites. I think it appropriate, therefore, to end with "Once upon a time, 21 first-grade students strayed from the path of traditional practice and treaded upon the far and away grounds of critical literacy." My challenge is for educators far and wide to consider their classrooms the critical landscape in which to continue this story—a story that, with their contributions, has potential to live on happily ever after.

## References

- Allington, R.L. (2001). *What really matters for struggling readers: Designing research-based programs*. New York: Longman.
- Bomer, R., & Bomer, K. (2001). *For a better world: Reading and writing for social action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Bryan, L. (2005). Once upon a time: A Grimm approach to character education. *Journal of Social Studies Research*, 29(1), 3–6.
- Cardiello, A. (2004). Democracy's young heroes: An instructional model of critical literacy practices. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(2), 138–147. doi:10.1598/RT.58.2.2
- Comber, B. (1998). Critical literacy: What's it all about? *Learning Matters*, 3(3), 8–13.

- Compton-Lilly, C. (2004). *Confronting racism, poverty, and power: Classroom strategies to change the world*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- DeVoogd, G. (2006). Question authority. *School Library Journal*, 52(4), 48–52.
- Finn, P.J. (1999). *Literacy with an attitude: Educating working-class children in their own self-interest*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gee, J.P. (2004). Discourse analysis: What makes it critical? In R. Rogers (Ed.), *An introduction to critical discourse analysis in education* (pp. 19–50). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Hurley, D.L. (2005). Seeing white: Children of color and the Disney fairy tale princess. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 74(3), 221–232.
- Jones, S. (2006). *Girls, social class, and literacy: What teachers can do to make a difference*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Leland, C.H., Harste, J.C., & Huber, K.R. (2005). Out of the box: Critical literacy in a first-grade classroom. *Language Arts*, 82(4), 257–268.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Powell, R., Cantrell, S.C., & Adams, S. (2001). Saving black mountain: The promise of critical literacy in a multicultural democracy. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(8), 772–781.
- Shannon, P. (1991). Questions and answers: Critical literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 44(7), 518–519.
- Simpson, A. (1996). Critical questions: Whose questions? *The Reading Teacher*, 50(2), 118–127.

*Bourke is a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University, and a literacy coach in The Bronx, New York, USA; e-mail rtbourke@gmail.com.*



### Lesson Link

For related lesson plans, visit [ReadWriteThink.org](http://ReadWriteThink.org) and click Lessons to find

- ▶ **Let's Talk About Stories: Shared Discussion With Amazing Grace**
- ▶ **Text Talk: Julius, the Baby of the World**
- ▶ **Charting Characters for a More Complete Understanding of the Story**

Copyright of Reading Teacher is the property of International Reading Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.