

## Critical and Authentic Reading in Secondary English Arts Classrooms

Jennifer Gallman

Banning and challenging books in the United States is not a new endeavor; however, the uptick of book challenges, specifically those in secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, creates new anxieties for English teachers who worry that culturally diverse student and author voices will be silenced. Friedman & Johnson (2022) of Pen America reported an increase of over two thousand banned books by over one thousand different authors/illustrators/translators, and of those thousands of restricted materials, around forty percent are related to LGBTQIA+ themes or non-White characters. Simultaneously, the varied student population in the United States continues to grow, creating an imbalance of real-world representation in the classroom curriculum. The U.S. Government Accountability Office released a report on July 14, 2022, stating, “during the 2020-21 school year, more than a third of students (about 18.5 million) attended schools where 75% or more students were of a single race or ethnicity” (Nowicki, 2022); therefore, schools are still divided racially, ethnically, and economically regardless of the growth in student diversity. In fact, the Institute of Education Sciences in May 2022 announced a decrease in White students from 2009 to 2020. The acceleration in student diversity should be reflected in the curriculum taught within the ELA classroom by providing students opportunities to read children’s and young adult books related to social justice issues, thereby foregrounding critical literacy and providing authentic experiences within the classroom.

### Framework

In a critical literacy framework, students are asked to engage with the materials given to them (or preferably the materials they choose) and ask questions regarding and synthesizing information about important topics such as history, race, and gender. McLaughlin & DeVogd (2004) indicated that critical literacy requires “a need to question rather than passively accept the information we encounter” (p. 52). Often in secondary public school classrooms, students sit at their desks and are given the assignment to read and answer comprehension questions—passively ingesting any information the educator deems important or skimming the surface of a text. Paulo Freire called this act of passive education the banking model in the groundbreaking work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As students continue to be consumers in the education process, Freire (1970/1993) suggested “the more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (p. 73). The educator in power who believes in this banking model provides the fragmented and subjective view of reality to control the materials selected for the course curriculum and eliminate choice and critical literacy from the curriculum. Instead, educators enacting a critical literacy approach ask their students to challenge the world around them through texts that represent their identities, their race and

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gender, and their communities.

To guide this literature review and define critical literacy in the twenty-first century, I used the four tenets of critical literacy from Lewison et al. (2002) who looked at over thirty years of meanings behind critical literacy. The four tenets include "(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 382). Each of the four tenets directly connects to the four themes of social injustice, literacy and power, authentic reading, and critical literacy (as a topic as well) by providing critical educators with the power to include more inclusive texts in the classroom.

Lewison et al. (2002) characterize disrupting the commonplace by understanding the historical stance of school subjects as a problem (Shor, 1987), learning to question the purpose of texts (Luke & Freebody, 1997), integrating critical media literacy and pop culture (Marsh, 2000; Shannon, 1995; Vasquez, 2000), incorporating critical and hopeful language (Shannon, 1995), and analyzing how texts establish or criticize the status quo (Fairclough, 1989, p. 383; Gee, 1990). Interrogating multiple viewpoints allows students to reflect on multiple perspectives that may be contradictory to the reader (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2000; Nieto, 1999), investigating whose voices are represented and whose voices are silenced (Luke & Freebody, 1997), from those voices who are silenced, figuring out how to raise those voices (Harste et al., 2000), examining narratives and counternarratives (Farrell, 1998; Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383). By focusing on sociopolitical issues, Lewison et al. (2002) suggest examining the sociopolitical involvements around us (Boozer, Maras, & Brummett, 1999), studying language and power to disrupt unequal power relationships (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1990), incorporating literacy into daily life and its politics (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993), and seeing literacy as a means to empower those not in power to build consciousness and resistance (Giroux, 1993). Finally, in order to take action and achieve social justice, educators need to engage in praxis (Freire, 1970/1993), question privilege and justice through language (Comber, 2001), study language for features of domination, access, diversity, and change current

conversations (Janks, 2000). By providing students with opportunities to read about social injustice through the power of authentic and critical reading, all four tenets of critical literacy are possible (given educator buy-in and a supportive administration) but unlikely if students are passive recipients of canonized literature that represents a singular, outdated viewpoint of reality.

## Methods

Research pertaining to critical and authentic reading was reviewed in order to examine the relationship between stakeholders and multicultural literature that is often banned or challenged. Specifically, the purpose of this review is to identify research that supports diverse texts in the secondary English Language Arts classroom. A literature search related to critical and authentic reading in the English Language Arts curriculum took place in the following databases using only peer-reviewed results and a date range of 1989-2022: Academic Search Complete, Education Full Text, Education Research Complete, EBSCO Host, and ERIC. I used several keywords to search for relevant peer-reviewed articles and then refined those keywords as searches returned fewer results. While some keywords like social justice returned several results though not necessarily related to curriculum, other keywords like literacy and power returned fewer results though literacy alone returned more results than the phrase literacy and power. The term critical literacy returned the most articles and was important for exploring the framework for the literature review as well as a subtopic.

To be included, an article had to meet the following criteria: (a) printed in a peer-reviewed journal; (b) written in English; (c) must address one of the keywords/subjects found in Table One; (d) focused on specific age groups of learners; and (e) the full-text was available. Book chapters were also included for analysis. Essays, commentaries, government reports, book reviews, and magazine and/or newspaper articles were excluded.

The keywords are summarized below, with the number of resulting articles for each keyword search with a beginning limiter of the publication dates of 2020-2023 then expanding back to 1993 to include

foundational works (See Table 1). Articles were printed and sorted into categories of similar topics (social justice, literacy and power, authentic reading, and critical literacy). The four tenets from Lewison et al. (2002) were critical in accepting and organizing articles based on keywords (see Table 1). Several articles were discarded after concluding that the articles were not related to the four tenets, English Language Arts, secondary school, banned or challenged books, or were book reviews or booklists of recommended texts.

**Table 1.** *Keyword Search for articles published from 1989 to 2022*

Keyword	Tenet	Number of Articles
Social Justice	1. Disrupting the commonplace 2. Interrogating multiple viewpoints 3. Focusing on socio-political lives 4. Taking action and promoting social justice	48
Literacy and Power	1. Disrupting the commonplace 2. Interrogating multiple viewpoints	50 (searched separately and together)
Authentic Reading	1. Interrogating multiple viewpoints	32
Critical Literacy	1. Disrupting the commonplace 2. Interrogating multiple viewpoints 3. Focusing on socio-political lives 4. Taking action and promoting social justice	68

*Note: There is some overlap in the keyword search of several articles*

## Literature

### Social Justice

Today, more publishers are highlighting the voices of authors of color, and more LGBTQ authors and allies are telling the stories of marginalized youth. To silence these voices is to mute student voices in the classroom, which essentially stifles any equitable opportunity to learn. Educators who fight against book bans and for diversity in children’s and young adult literature are social justice advocates in the education system, but there has to be a buy-in from secondary English teachers specifically to see themselves as agents of

change. Moje (2007) argued that learning opportunities must “provide access to mainstream knowledge and practices but also provide opportunities to question, challenge, and reconstruct knowledge” (p. 4). Essentially, a social justice lens provides students the opportunities to access materials that they not only consume but learn to critically engage; the problem is that not all students receive these opportunities.

Cazden et al., (1996) argued that “literacy educators and students must see themselves as active participants in social change, as learners and students who can be active designers--makers--of social futures” (p. 64). While this alignment of English teachers as social justice advocates is not an easy process, the transition is certainly a vital one for the protection of a student population that needs multicultural literature in the classroom (Savitz, et al., 2022).

To begin this process, one must embrace not only a social justice mindset but also a socially just pedagogy. Moje (2007) clarified socially just pedagogy as “equitable opportunities to learn” (p. 3) and social justice pedagogy as “involv[ing] more than providing equitable learning opportunities” (p. 4). While an ELA teacher may provide an opportunity to access culturally encompassing texts (socially just pedagogy), they should also provide opportunities to critically engage (social justice pedagogy) with those texts. Part of having those equitable outcomes is offering choices in inclusive texts; therefore, the first step of becoming a social justice educator is looking at one’s view of the school. Cazden et al. (1996) clearly stated, “An authentically democratic view of schools must include a vision of meaningful success for all, a vision of success that is not defined exclusively in economic terms” (p. 67). Equitable and meaningful opportunities can be provided by offering meaningful texts because providing White-only texts to classrooms of mostly non-White students is not providing children with a view of their own lives and cultures. Silva & Savitz (2019) highlighted the significance of including more diverse young adult (YA) literature to critically analyze adolescent constructs (p. 330). By allowing students the opportunity to identify with these texts, they can progress to analyzing those texts through a critical lens that analyzing the canon does not provide.

One way to incorporate a critical lens is to look at current news and determine who has the power and who does not – whose voices are represented and whose are silenced (Dunkerly-Bean & Bean, 2016). If a critical literacy educator faces a situation in which they cannot change the curriculum in favor of socially just pedagogy, they can still change the narrative by asking students to add their diverse voices to canonized texts. Implications for the classroom here could be providing Socratic Seminars where students have the opportunity to discuss connections between the provided text and real-world events. For example, students are not

equitable education system, the student is the center of the learning process, and all other methods or frameworks, or strategies, branch off from the student's learning preferences. Kaput (2018) clarifies that there is no agreed-upon definition for student-centered learning; however, "the unifying theme is that in student-centered learning the model shifts from being adult-centered and standardized to student-centric and individualized" (p. 10). Learning, then, becomes personalized to each student, allowing students the space to research related topics to canonized or non-flexible texts allows students to change the narrative.

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**There is power in literature and literacy: the power within the students, the power within the written word, the power within the author, and the power within the subject matter. When a critical literacy educator has a multicultural student population (even when they do not) , and the curriculum prohibits inclusive texts, institutionalized racism overpowers minority cultures.**

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given a choice of what text to read due to current and restrictive policy, so the class reads *Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose. A critical literacy educator can open dialogue with their students through a Socratic Seminar where students read fiction or nonfiction social justice issues such as police brutality (read *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds or *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone) or the mistreatment and hatred towards Muslim Americans and Chinese Americans (read *Internment* by Samira Ahmed or *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang). In the Socratic Seminar format, students first meet together as a group to discuss the themes present in the texts, asking each other questions about connections to the texts and themes, and building empathy towards each other. After the Socratic Seminar, students receive more individualized instruction in how they continue to respond to the text; for example, students have a choice in how they complete their final engagement with the text, which may be to research more about the topics and themes of the text (current legal cases or news articles that showcase the present-day relevance of the themes), create a presentation related to historical events, or teach the class connections to a paired text.

Providing choice is an important component of critical literacy classrooms. Asking a student to ignore their backgrounds, cultures, and identities forfeits any hope of social justice in the education system. In an

Diaz (2021) asked educators to include student backgrounds, identities, and social structures to allow for their future success (p. 13). To facilitate this, researchers have critically analyzed YA literature based on broad social themes such as freedom (Bean & Harper, 2006), privilege (Glenn, 2008), social justice (Glasgow, 2001), or specific demographics of people found in the text with whom some students can identify, such as rape victims (Alsup, 2003). If an educator has thirty students in the classroom, certainly they are thirty students with thirty different backgrounds and experiences. The likelihood of choosing one novel that connects to all thirty students is low. Providing a variety of choices increases the likelihood that students will be able to connect to the text. One tangible way to provide more choices in the secondary ELA classroom is through book clubs where students have the opportunity to select a book to read with a small group of their peers connected to a broader theme the whole class is studying.

### **Literacy and Power**

There is power in literature and literacy: the power within the students, the power within the written word, the power within the author, and the power within the subject matter. When a critical literacy educator has a multicultural student population (even when

they do not), and the curriculum prohibits inclusive texts, institutionalized racism overpowers minority cultures (Fairclough, 2022). All educators have a unique responsibility to engage students using multicultural literature thereby empowering student voices in the classroom.

Incorporating multicultural literacy “has both ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’ benefits of both empowerment and dignity” (Madison & Cole, 2022, p. 209). Some examples of tangible benefits may include an increase in participation by minority students in the classroom as well as students learning about differing viewpoints and cultures. Some examples of intangible gains may include increasing self-esteem and pride in one’s identity. Recognizing that what occurs outside of the classroom has a direct impact on the students in the classroom allows an educator to make decisions regarding curriculum that includes incorporating comprehensive texts and raising up student voices. Pennycook (2016) suggested that “everything in the classroom...needs to be seen as social and cultural practices that have broader implications than just elements of classroom interaction” (p. 33). The power of aligning one’s curriculum with real-world events, modern cultural practices, and new and evolving identities lies at the heart of, not only socially just pedagogy, but in education itself.

Because a classroom is representative of social and cultural practices, there exist levels of power structures between educator and student, student and student, and educator and administration. Savitz, et al. (2022) suggest:

White students, students of color, and other historically marginalized students need educational opportunities that will not simply support students’ access to social, economic, and academic power structures, but also develop language and literacy practices capable of challenging the White-dominated status quo (p. 2).

Essentially, a critical literacy or social justice educator seeks to empower all students, and an initial step towards the dismantling of the power structures that currently control the education system is to challenge the power structures that dictate curriculum. To interrogate and ultimately challenge those power

structures through literacy is to embrace inclusive texts and amplify the voices of the disenfranchised. The issue here is the policy itself and the difficult journey to make any systemic change. Policy assume[s] that teachers who are empowered, sincere, and serious about their work would be able to tailor programs and activities to the needs and interests of individual children. Such an approach makes sense only when teacher knowledge is widely and richly distributed in our profession. To offer these prerogatives in the face of narrow and shallow knowledge is to guarantee that misguided practices, even perversions of the very intent of the movement, will be widespread. The puzzle, of course, is where to begin the reform—by ensuring that the knowledge precedes the prerogative, or by ceding the prerogative to teachers as a way of leveraging their motivation for greater knowledge. (Pearson, 2004, p. 223).

A blueprint for policy change is not created by one critical literacy educator but by a movement of educators to intentionally and meaningfully decide that enough is enough. No more gag orders. No more silence. No more book bans.

Adam Stone (2022) of TEACH Magazine provides some tangible implications for the classroom in terms of the policy change including: having conversations with parents or guardians about books and inviting parents or guardians to join in conversations with their children and with the teacher about the book’s content, allowing time after reading a challenged or banned book for students to write testimonials or reviews explaining what they enjoyed about the book, joining groups like PEN America, NCTE, or the ACLU to help fight policies that seek to ban books and materials in the classroom, and becoming friends with the school’s librarian(s) who are often more knowledgeable about the school’s current status with certain books. Building relationships with administrators, district office faculty, local community leaders, students, and parents are the most beneficial steps toward fighting policy change.

### **Authentic Reading**

Young adults bring excitement and anxiety, joy and heartache, reflection and criticism into the classroom, and they, perhaps more than anyone else, acknowledge that what happens in their lives outside

of school becomes a part of the fabric of their student lives. Educators can acknowledge that “what goes on inside the classroom is always tied to what goes on outside” (Pennycook, 2016, p. 33). The unpredictability, and often tragic nature, of the real world can lead to many conversations in the classroom that are critical for fostering growth and supporting identity. When faced with a devastating event like a school shooting or police brutality, classrooms need to be spaces where students feel safe to have conversations, and books are often mechanisms for these types of dialogues. Not only a space for safety, but classrooms themselves are also locations for interrogating injustice and false narratives (Wilder & Msseemmaa, 2019). For example, a book like *A Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds, can lead students to think critically about the cycle of violence and decisions that not only impact one’s own life but the life of a possibly innocent person. *Monday’s Not Coming* by Tiffany D. Jackson, forces students to think about their classmates and understand that no one knows what is going on with the student next to them and that trauma and abuse can easily be concealed. Allowing students the opportunity to make these connections to themselves and to their classmates increases self-awareness and empathy.

These situations of crisis are not to be avoided, bottled up, and thrown away; instead, critical literacy educators must embrace these heavy topics by incorporating opportunities to read children’s and young adult books of other’s perspectives and, potentially, to converse with other students about possible trauma. In discussing adolescent literacy, Dunkerly-Bean & Bean (2016) stated, “the language of adolescent literacy has largely been one of crisis” (pp. 456-457). More children’s and young adult authors are writing about traumatic events because traumatic events occur almost daily in the United States. Silva and Savitz (2019) believe YA literature allows opportunities for students to critically engage in topics that are relevant to their lives, their identities, and their cultures. If educators continue to disregard what is happening outside the classroom, the students sitting in the classroom are less likely to have a true understanding of all of the events, both the tragic and the fantastic. Unfortunately, many of the books being banned and

challenged in the last few years are relevant to the tragedies, and the emotions to process these events can be suppressed by decision-makers and banking educators. Books can be therapeutic, not only for the author but for the reader.

Many of the books being banned and challenged are also critical in order to understand history. Concerning children’s books, Duncan (2020) pointed out that when teaching historical topics like slavery many children’s books omit vital information. Some authors may be afraid of including too much information that would deem the books as controversial or inappropriate for a specific grade level. The traditional thinking is that perhaps it is better to give children some history rather than no history at all. However, educators need to ask whose story is being excluded when these “controversial” topics are left out of texts.

Brown vs. The Board of Education, declared segregation in education unconstitutional in 1954; however, there is little payoff from the legislation regarding diversity of materials and curricula. Looking at “education after Brown,” Guinier (2004) asserted, “Public education became a battlefield rather than a constructive gravitational force within many communities” (p. 114). Parents attacked teachers, children attacked each other, and political forces became a mainstay in the curriculum. Many places in the South saw violence and racism pending desegregating schools, and many schools today contend with racial conflict, a lack of resources, and an overall stranglehold by those in power (Hawes & Parker, 2016). Perhaps Alim & Paris (2017) said it best: “the purpose of state-sanctioned schooling has been to forward the largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools” (p. 1). Think about canonized books here (with excerpts still found in most textbooks across the country): *To Kill a Mockingbird* (often taught in ninth or tenth grade), *The Great Gatsby* (often taught in eleventh grade or American literature), and *Beowulf* (often taught in twelfth grade or British literature) all represent the bedrock of Western culture and the White savior mentality. Instead of, or as a pairing with, teaching these canonized texts, critical

literacy educators can pair *To Kill a Mockingbird* with *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson or *Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi in tenth grade to discuss the history of racism in America, pair *The Great Gatsby* with *Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry in eleventh grade to discuss the American Dream and personal sacrifice, and pair *Beowulf* with *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe in twelfth grade to discuss the honor and glory of the English culture and the violence of imperialism.

### **Critical Literacy**

Once students are given the tools to think critically about the world around them, critical literacy educators are likely to see growth in their students' empathy towards each other and a deeper understanding of the events that happen in their lives. The purpose of education "is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential" (hooks, 1994, p. 13). Whether a conversation occurs through open dialogue, debate, or journaling, books are conversation starters and powerful tools for student growth.

Nevertheless, growth may not exist without critical literacy, critical thinking, critical conversation, and critical reflection. Thinking of the last few years particularly, which include the COVID-19 years, an increase in school and mass shootings, and an increase in police brutality, "it is more important than ever to provide our students with the discipline and disposition to view issues that arise in society, to collaborate on potential resolutions to those issues, and to debate the merits of proposed resolutions" (Malloy et al., 2020, p. 97). Many of these topics are found in books like *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds which discusses police brutality and *This is Where It Ends* by Marieke Nijkamp which deals with school shootings.

One of the most significant areas of book challenges and bans involves LGBTQIA+ and sexual content. *Together Apart* by Erin A. Craig, Auriane Desombre, Erin Hahn, and others which follows teen relationships including the love story of two boys. *The 57 Bus* by Dashka Slater follows an agender teen who is set on fire on a bus ride home where both the agender character

and the violence of setting a human being on fire are both controversial. *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe is an autobiographical graphic novel that became the most widely known banned book in the United States since 2021 (Alter, 2022). Of the American Library Association's (2023) 2022 Top 13 Most Challenged Books, all 13 include LGBTQIA+ and sexual content. While these topics are certainly difficult, they allow spaces for students to wrestle with questions of character and motivation, of seeing they are not alone in their experiences.

Students need this reflective practice to cope with challenging topics that exist within society. Therefore, putting these books in the hands of students can ignite curiosity and passion about difficult and uncomfortable topics. Arguing the need for critical literacy, Cridland-Hughes (2016) calls for an education system that is inclusive of all students from all backgrounds as they represent not only themselves but their families and communities. While many public school districts have grown more conservative in the last decade in regard to curriculum and book choices, the lives that students bring into the classrooms, which are reflected in children's and young adult books, are increasingly complicated. Student voices deserve to be heard, authors' voices deserve to be read, and educator voices deserve to be respected.

### **Conclusion**

The themes of social justice, literacy and power, authentic reading, and critical literacy appear throughout the literature, leading to one main conclusion: social justice is the result of powerful, authentic, and critical literacy when administration allows educators curricular diversity and when students become actively and critically engaged with these diverse materials. More scholars today are speaking out against discrepancies in the lack of equity and access in secondary ELA curricula by providing arguments for social justice texts that can replace canonized literature, or pair with canonized literature, at the very least. Power must be won through the struggle against those who seek (banking educators and conservative politicians) to restrict culturally encompassing materials and given to the social justice advocates, the educators, who

want to amplify the voices of their students. Ultimately, culturally diverse texts encourage empathy, create bonds between students and the community, allow students to engage in authentic conversations about controversial topics, and ask students to change the world. As cliché as that may sound, in 2022, amidst the thousands of attempts to silence specific voices, educators are now the negotiator between the powerful voices in a school district and the voices that matter most: the students.

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