Developing Critical Literacy in the Primary Grades: Can it be done? What might that look like?
How might we foster critical literacy in primary classrooms?

We know that Critical literacy is one of the main goals of reading instruction. We know that critical thinking, and more specifically critical literacy, are often fostered through the language curriculum.

My big wondering is: How? I believe in teaching for the development of Critical literacy in middle school, but how would this work- or can this work- in primary classrooms?
What IS critical literacy?

Critical literacy is one of the goals of teaching higher order thinking; it involves teaching readers to deeply question the values and ideas present in texts to uncover and consider the perspectives of inequity and injustice.

Ontario Curriculum defines Critical Literacy as:

Critical Literacy “views readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text’s message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors. It focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action.”

(Freire, 1970 Pedagogy of the Oppressed).
Why is it important?

Critical Literacy is considered “a new basic” skill for navigating text in our “Knowledge Society” and media-saturated world.

Critical literacy involves explicitly teaching children to examine purpose, points of view represented or absent and issues of power and privilege.

Why teach critical literacy?

“Students today experience a constant stream of ideas and information - online, in print, and through electronic games and mass media. As they move into the junior grades, they encounter an ever-widening range of texts. They need skills to determine where to direct their attention and how to interpret messages and use them appropriately.”

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 9)

Critical Literacy

Research Tells Us

Critical literacy --

- goes beyond simply decoding and understanding texts
- can be thought of as a way of thinking that challenges the inherent meaning of information and, by extension, life situations
- leads to understanding of power relationships that may help students to perceive and take action against injustice

Developing Critical Literacy Skills

Promoting Critical Literacy across the Curriculum and Fostering Sa...
What does it involve?

Teachers helping students to see how texts are constructed and how authors of text are able to influence our understanding and view of the world.

Not just about literacy ...

“By teaching students to reflect on human rights and social justice issues, critical literacy may help students develop empathy.”

Dimensions of Critical Literacy

Lewison, Flint and Van (p. 382) identify the four following dimensions of critical literacy:

- disrupting the commonplace
- considering multiple viewpoints
- examining sociopolitical issues
- taking action to promote social justice
How is this done in Primary grades?

The resource Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students Comprehension of Text provides a framework for approaching Critical Literacy instruction (left) and shares several specific strategies: problem posing, switching, and more; this resource also includes many instructional examples for the primary grades.

Some Classroom Activities

- Ask children to make a Venn diagram to compare characteristics of princes and princesses in traditional fairy tales. Then, do the same for more contemporary fairy tales like "The Paper Bag Princess." Then compare the two.
- For one week, ask children to compare male and female jobs in the books they are reading. A Venn diagram can be used to demonstrate occupations that are attributed to men or women only and which ones are attributed to both. This is then followed by discussion of real life today.
- Ask children to compare books designed by publishers for "boys" and those for "girls" in terms of covers, colours and content. They then write a journal entry about how these features influenced their book choice.

How can teachers use children’s literature to support development of critical literacy skills?
How does this fit in with the primary learner?

The primary learner is developing their view of the world, and ways of seeing and reasoning. This is an ideal developmental time to begin discussing perspectives, bias, stereotypes, and empathy for people that have been marginalized.
How does Critical Literacy fit primary curricula?

The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8, Language
Ways to make it happen in primary:

Strategies for Critical Literacy:

1. Problem posing. Just as texts position us to think of ourselves in a certain way, so that we feel compelled to buy a product or identify with a character in a film, we as readers or viewers can problematic texts. Also called “problem posing,” problematicizing provides teachers with a way to consciously and intentionally nurture a critical perspective. Problem posing requires that we ask ourselves questions such as the following:
   - How might others understand this text differently?
   - Why was the message of the text been constructed or crafted?
   - Who is the intended audience?
   - How has the text coloured your view of reality?
   - What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented or have been omitted?
   - Who created this text and why?
   - What techniques and stylistic elements have been used and why?

2. Juxtaposing. The intent of this strategy is to have students come to an understanding of point of view. Two texts on a similar topic (e.g., editorials) are set side by side so that students can compare author’s bias, perspective and intent as well as strategies used to influence the reader/viewer (adapted from McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 47).

3. Switching. This is an effective strategy for getting students to consider the impact of alternative perspectives and to identify which voices are present and which voices are missing from character of the other gender, setting switch (students set the story in a different time or place or switch the social class of characters), and emotion switch (students have characters exhibit a different emotional tone) (adapted from McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 51).

Other tools:
Four corners
Six Hats
5 Key Questions of Media Literacy

Questioning the author. When responding to question prompts from the teacher (e.g., “What does the author mean here?” and “Whose voice is absent?”), students use an organizer divided into four columns that are labelled: “the question...” / “The author says...” / “I say...” / “So?” (adapted from Ministry of Education 2006a, pp. 144-145)

Think aloud. This strategy encourages teachers and students to make their thinking explicit so that others in the class can join the discussion. What is the author’s thinking? What are the underlying assumptions? How do we know? How can we weigh opinions against facts?
Going deeper: Gender Stereotypes in Children’s Literature

Research Monograph #32 on Developing Critical Literacy Skills focuses on gender stereotypes in children’s literature.

“Given that equality of the sexes is one of the foundations of our democratic society, it is important to support students in developing their critical literacy skills by considering the values and ideologies inherent in the representations of femininity and masculinity in books written for children.”

Research Tells Us

- Children’s literature contributes to the transmission of ideologies, particularly with respect to gender.
- Gender asymmetry is greatest in stories about animals who are given exaggerated human traits (e.g., adult females depicted by exaggeratedly long eyelashes, a pearl necklace, an apron).
- Sexist representations impact child development, conveying “rules” for how to be masculine and feminine and how one is supposed to act as a boy or a girl.
- Critical literacy activities help children understand how stereotypes are created in literature and how they exert influence on behaviour.

“... a child’s gender identity forms gradually through interactions with others and exposure to media, including books. Witnessing the beliefs and values that prevail in this social context, a child forms simplified representations of the roles and attributes associated with masculinity and femininity.”

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More ideas:

A great example:

- The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch

This book, which is appropriate for younger readers, reverses the gender roles in traditional fairy tales. The princess is the one who must slay the dragon and rescue the prince. Teachers could ask:
  - From whose perspective is the story being told?
  - How are the prince, princess, and dragon portrayed in this story?
  - How would the story be different if told from the prince's perspective?
  - From the dragon's perspective?

Does this fairy tale resemble a small or large number of fairy tales?

Why do you think so?

Key Ideas:

Helen Lenski proposes some guiding principles for teaching critical literacy in a classroom setting:

- Take into consideration the purpose of the text and the author's intentions.
- Examine the representation of various groups in the text.
- Understand that texts offer a particular view of the world.
- Analyze the methods used to transmit the message.
- Take into consideration the power of the language used by the author.
- Read the text from different perspectives.
- Encourage students to take a stand on the author's statements.
- Provide students with the opportunity to consider and clarify their own points of view.
- Provide students with the opportunity to take social action.

**Trade Books That Support...**

Critical Literacy

- Amazing Grace by M. Hoffman
- Fly Away Home by T. Runberg
- The Lady in the Box by A. McGovern
- Music of Dolphins by K. Hesse
- No, David! by D. White
- Oliver Button Is a Sissy by T. DePaola
- The Pogo Stick by A. Brown
- Ruby's Wish by S. Bridges
- Three Coal Kids by R. Emberley
- William's Doll by C. Zolotow

- Encourage students to think critically about advertising by having them each watch a children's TV show and record which cereals are advertised.
My big takeaway: It’s possible!

Given the primary learner’s developmental needs and readiness; the primary curricula; the goals of fluent reading comprehension and media literacy; the need to foster equity and social justice; and the need to *learn to think and think to learn*: CRITICAL LITERACY makes sense for primary. The resources below (referenced throughout this presentation) provide many practical strategies that help me see it’s not just possible- it’s downright exciting!


