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## Creating Critical Readers and Responders Using the Common Core State Standards

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# Creating Critical Readers and Responders Using the Common Core State Standards

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**Abstract**—In this article, we offer a framework that supports teachers as they create opportunities for students to become critical readers and responders. With the Critical Reader and Responder (or CR<sup>2</sup>) Framework, teachers can use their understandings of readers, texts, and tasks as entry points for planning critical literacy response activities that meet Common Core State Standards (CCSS). We provide specific examples of how elementary teachers, faced with a myriad of constraints in their instructional planning, can use the framework to meet CCSS and prepare students to be critical readers in and out of the classroom.

The introduction of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts has opened up new questions for educators with regards to curriculum and instruction: How do these standards change the way my curriculum is shaped and what content I need to cover? What do I need to do differently to ensure that my students meet the standards? In our analysis of the CCSS for reading, we were struck by two things: first, the standards provide opportunities for teachers to exercise professional judgment in deciding how and what to teach; however, there are limited supports for teachers to create opportunities that allow students to explore issues of power, culture, and language. We argue that the way reader, text, and task are framed in the CCSS fails to attend to expanded notions of critical literacy. While the standards do provide an opening for teachers to go beyond instruction in basic skills, they do not encourage teachers to position students as text critics who bring their prior knowledge and life experiences to the literacy classroom.

The CCSS focus heavily on the texts that teachers use in their classrooms. The standards “intentionally do not offer a reading list” and “defer the many remaining decisions about what and how to teach to states, districts, and schools” (“Key Points,” 2012). To guide these decisions, the Common Core ELA standards include two appendices—one with an explanation of the standards’ three-part model for measuring text complexity and the other with text exemplars and sample performance tasks. While significant guidance is provided in these appendices for consideration of text complexity, teachers have little to work from in designing reading and response tasks and very minimal guidance for connecting texts to readers. We agree with the authors of the standards that determining the appropriateness—and moreover relevance—of a text for students is “best made by teachers employing their professional judgment, experience, and knowledge of their students and the subject” (CCSS, Appendix A, p. 4). However, we argue that teachers need some support in thinking through those decisions.

We offer a framework that supports teachers as they create opportunities for students to become critical readers and responders. With the Critical Reader and Responder (or CR<sup>2</sup>) Framework, teachers can use their understandings of readers, texts, and tasks as starting, or entry, points for planning critical literacy response activities that meet CCSS (Figure 1). This framework builds from existing work that connects critical literacy and reader response theory to practice. It is designed to be flexible; one or more entry points can be used to design engaging lessons and activities that occur before, during, and/or after the reading and response to texts. In this article, we provide specific examples of how elementary teachers, faced with a myriad of constraints in their instructional planning, can use the framework to meet CCSS and prepare students to be critical readers in and out of the classroom.

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## WHAT IS CRITICAL LITERACY?

### Critical Literacy

One goal of the CR<sup>2</sup> Framework is to position students as users and critics of texts. In society, there are dominant forms of language and literacies (Bourdieu, 1991; Janks, 2000), which become apparent in the ways students are being taught. In many

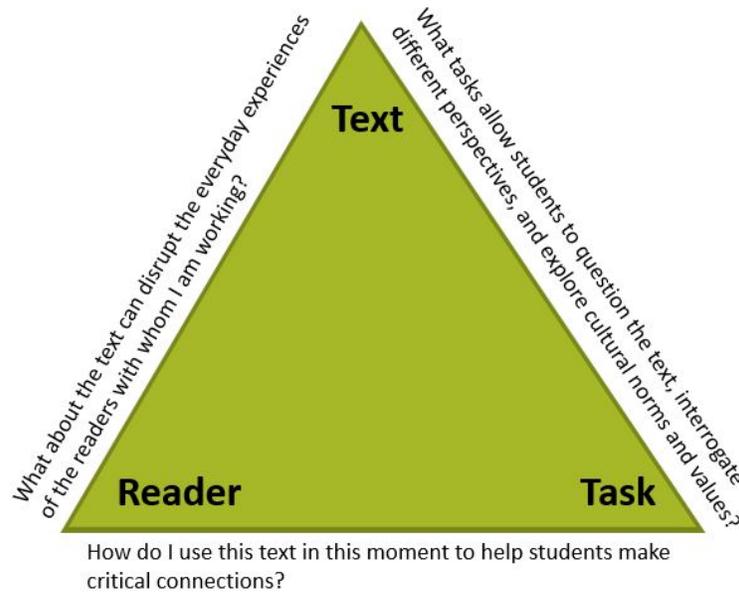


Figure 1: CR<sup>2</sup> Framework

schools, texts are often left unquestioned by students and teachers alike (Vasquez, 2010). This leads to the idea that language, and in this case, text, holds a certain degree of power or authority. When schools and teachers rely too heavily on “neutral” texts (e.g., textbooks) and ways of conveying information (e.g., scripted curricula), it reinforces the notion of an unquestioned authority. Pedagogies that focus on transmitting knowledge to students continue to perpetuate these particular notions of truth, which does a disservice to students and underestimates the perspectives and experiences that they bring to the classroom. The text is positioned as most powerful, with teachers and students subject to its authority.

The challenge for teachers implementing critical literacy in the classroom is getting from theory to actual practices, though considerable work has been done to support teachers in this process (Heffernon & Lewison, 2000). Critical literacy is not a set of prescribed teaching methods; Behrman (2006) even states that critical literacy cannot be seen as a “coherent curricular approach” (p. 490). There are many theoretically-grounded reasons for the lack of scripted critical literacy curricula: a desire to create critical literacy activities based on the needs and interests of students (Luke, 2000), different foci for critical literacy education (Janks, 2000), and a need for the continual redefinition of critical literacy in light of changing power structures and policies (Behrman, 2006). However, there are specific steps that teachers can take to create environments in which students have the opportunity to engage in critical literacy activities. Being thoughtful and deliberate about three areas of reading instruction—reader, text, and task—can create literacy experiences that are meaningful (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001), authentic (Gambrell, 2011), and relevant to the lives of readers (Wood & Jocius, 2013; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001).

### Reader Response

When implementing critical literacy in the classroom, teachers must carefully consider how readers are positioned to respond to texts. Research on reader response theory has traditionally focused on three major areas: the text (including information about the author and how textual features affect response), the reader, and the context in which the response is generated (Galda & Beach, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1968; 1978/2004). Contemporary theories on reader response assert that “meaning resides not in the author’s intentions (nor in the text itself) but in the literary experience of readers and their social interactions with each other” (Sipe, 1999, p. 121). In addition, other factors must be considered; a reader’s prior knowledge, experience, and emotions can all shape responses to texts (Galda & Beach, 2001). We know that in any reading or writing experience, the context can often determine the type of response. Schooling provides one context that can have “an enormous influence on the kinds of literary response that students will come to see as appropriate and even natural” (Marshall, 2000, p. 393).

One criticism of reader response theories is the lack of attention paid to critical issues in society at large that are often reflected in literary texts; Lewis (2000) argues that many perspectives on reader response emphasize the personal at the expense of the social and political. As Bean and Moni (2003) state, all students, both accomplished and struggling, need to be given opportunities to make personal, social, political, and intertextual connections to literature; further, “critical literacy takes the reader beyond the bounds of reader response” (p. 643). At the heart of creating critical pedagogies in classrooms and schools is understanding that language is never neutral (Bakhtin, 1986) and that issues revolving around power,

ideologies, and politics are present in each text. Therefore, we argue that a positioning of reader as responder *and* critic is necessary.

### The Critical Reader And Responder (CR<sup>2</sup>) Framework

In order to incorporate critical literacy in the classroom, teachers need to explicitly consider the role of readers, text, and task in their course and lesson planning (see Figure 2 for questions that teachers can ask themselves in the planning process). The framework can be used to help teachers think about existing curricula and their class as a whole, in addition to providing ways to approach a specific lesson or unit. No matter where the teacher starts—a choice often made as a result of required reading lists or curricular materials or even norms within a school or department, the teacher may miss opportunities to engage students in critical literacy if all three entities are not considered. There is not a “right” entry point, as the framework is dynamic and fluid and designed to support students in making critical connections throughout the reading process. Teachers may find themselves repeatedly coming back to the framework as they gain new understandings of their students, new readings of texts, or new ideas for tasks, and approaching the same intended lesson in a new way. In this section, we explore how the parts of the framework are connected both theoretically and practically.

Questions to Guide Your Lesson Planning	
Starting With	Questions to Consider
Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I know about the worldviews explored in this text?</li> <li>• Whose perspectives are represented and whose are not?</li> <li>• What is normalized?</li> </ul>
Readers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I already know about the readers with whom I’m working?</li> <li>• How do they think about the world?</li> <li>• What is “normal” for them?</li> </ul>
Task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do I know about how the students normally approach this task?</li> <li>• To what extent does this task ask students to consider multiple perspectives, including their own?</li> <li>• In what way does the task allow students a chance to use or question the text?</li> </ul>

Figure 2: Guiding Questions for CR<sup>2</sup>

### Text And Task

An important component of critical literacy pedagogy relates to the tasks that students and teachers engage in when reading a text. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) argue that teachers can promote critical literacy through four types of activities: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action. Further, Behrman (2006) identified six categories based on

student activities and tasks: reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, conducting student-choice research projects, taking social action, and producing *counternarratives*, which are texts that present ideas from an alternative, and often oppositional, perspective (Peters & Lankshear, 1996, p. 2). Through these practices, students respond to texts while building on their own perspectives and experiences. In doing so, their views of the world can be disrupted, encouraging them to question their own assumptions as well as those made by a text or author. Allowing students to analyze and critique texts from multiple viewpoints and engaging in varied response projects that move students from accepting text as truth to more critical pedagogies should be at the heart of any critical literacy activity. As teachers examine texts and tasks they might ask themselves, “What tasks allow students to question the text, interrogate different perspectives, and explore cultural norms and values?”

### Reader And Text

The dynamic relationship between reader and text has major implications for how texts will be interpreted, understood, and deciphered. In Rosenblatt’s (1978/2004) transactional theory of reading, she argues that “meaning does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader but happens or comes into being during the transaction between reader and text” (p. 1369). The relationship between the text and the reader comes as a result of a complex set of factors (Knobel & Healy, 1998) that often stem from a reader’s previous life experiences, whether experiences with other texts, in one’s own community, or simply as a result of being a part of a literate society. Therefore, we can conclude that the reading of texts is never neutral, just as text themselves are never neutral (Luke, 2000; Vasquez, 2010). In looking at the specific needs and characteristics of readers first and then determining texts, teachers might ask themselves, “What about the text can disrupt the everyday experiences of the readers with whom I am working?” Teachers must use their knowledge of the specific readers in their classroom to determine what types of texts will encourage students to question their own assumptions about what is commonplace.

### Reader And Task

In order to take a critical literacy approach to task creation, the teacher must take into account who his or her students are. Not only should the task be linked with the text, but the reader must also be considered in task. Students bring a wealth of experiences to the classroom from which the teacher can draw when planning critical literacy tasks. Comber (2001) notes that “the varying practices that different children bring with them can become part of a collective capacity to solve problems and approach possibilities” (p. 2). Oftentimes, teachers will do their best to use texts and generate tasks based on students’ preferences. Luke (2000) challenges this idea by suggesting that a task might be generated out of a student’s dislike for a

text. He states, “If students don’t like a particular text, for example, we can encourage them to speculate on what kind of person, in what kind of cultural or historical context might have written such a text?” (p. 9). This approach, though not typical, is a different way of engaging and leveraging students’ viewpoints in an effort to create relevant critical tasks. When planning a task, teachers might ask, “How do I use this text in this moment to help students make critical connections?”

## CR<sup>2</sup> MODEL AND THE COMMON CORE RATIONALE

As former English language arts teachers, it is important to us that the ideas we share bridge theory and practice. In this section, we provide examples of how starting from different entry points can help teachers plan critical literacy instruction using the CCSS, text exemplars, and sample performance tasks. We developed these examples based on our experience as teachers, tutors, and reading coaches, in addition to drawing on the experiences of teachers whom we have observed or supervised and existing empirical critical literacy research. Because we are looking at the elementary grades, where critical literacy is least commonly found, we chose to focus on grades 1 and 4 to represent early and late elementary years. We also made an effort to pull from a variety of genres, including stories, poetry, and informational texts. The following sections are in no way comprehensive in how teachers might incorporate critical literacy into instructional activities that meet the requirements of the CCSS. However, we hope they provide useful examples with enough depth and breadth to get teachers started with using the framework in their own classrooms.

### Starting With Readers: Focusing On What’s Important To 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Students

For as much as the Common Core reading standards emphasize the importance of the text and its complexity, there is very little consideration for the reader. The standards make reference to the idea that teachers should draw upon their experience with and knowledge of students, but provide no real support for doing so. In the standards themselves, readers are called on to interpret the text within the confines of the author’s intent, seeming to take the stance that texts can be neutral. This, in particular, may make teachers hesitant to position students in a way that they can “talk back” to the text.

One approach to implementing critical literacy in the classroom is interrogating multiple viewpoints. However, knowing which perspectives will help students “talk back” must come from the teacher’s knowledge of the students. A helpful way for teachers to think about starting with students is to ask, “What do I know about assumptions my students have about the world related to things that are very important to them?” They can then think about ways to disrupt those assumptions, such that students are encouraged to recognize that not everyone’s world looks like theirs. This ultimately primes young students to begin to wonder whether everyone

has a life like theirs, and if not, to want to know what others’ lives look like.

For example, a topic that is often very important to first graders is birthdays. They are finally old enough to understand what a birthday is, and they often look forward to their own birthday each year. In addition, it is common for teachers to post first-graders’ birthdays on the wall and perhaps reference them in teaching about days, months, and years. In the United States and many Western cultures, birthdays are highly individualistic, which is part of the excitement for young students. When working from a reader-centered point-of-view, this set-up is ideal for disruption—Does everyone celebrate birthdays in the same way? Are birthdays always focused on the individual birthday boy or girl? The K-1 text exemplar story “Birthday Soup,” in Else Holmelund Minarik’s (1957) *Little Bear*, tells the story of a little bear who cannot find his mother on his birthday and so goes about making “birthday soup” in lieu of a cake. At the end of the story, the mother appears with a cake as a surprise for her little bear. Little Bear says that birthday soup is good, but “not as good as Birthday Cake.”

The story reinforces norms of Western birthday traditions with a focus on a party, cake, and a focus on the birthday bear. Reading Standard 9 requires students to “compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in stories” (CCSS, ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.9). However, in expanding the notion of “experiences of characters in stories” to include either students in the classroom who celebrate birthdays in other ways or the experiences of children in other countries, teachers can disrupt individualistic notions of birthdays. This reading of *Little Bear* also opens up opportunities for the teacher to introduce students to the birthday customs of children from other cultures. In Vietnam and parts of Africa, young children do not have individual birthday celebrations; instead, groups of children celebrate their birthdays collectively. Even in first grade, students can be supported to make sense of these differences (i.e., between the individualistic versus collectivist nature of these cultures), and think about the fun in celebrating birthdays differently.

As a task, the class re-narrates the story of Little Bear from a different cultural background with other traditions. This is an example of a very short lesson that would help students develop the compare-and-contrast skills emphasized in the standard, connect to something important to them—birthdays—and disrupt their Americanized ideals of how one celebrates a birthday. At a basic level, it teaches young children that the experience presented in any story is partial and does not necessarily represent a generalizable norm. While students may be able to discover this simply by comparing the birthday traditions in their own families, pulling in less familiar examples from Asian and African traditions may be necessary to disrupt their ideas of how birthdays are “done.”

### Starting from Text: Looking Among and Across 4th Grade Poetry

The CCSS place a nearly singular focus on the text, with the understood task being comprehension. Fifteen of the 43

pages in Appendix A are used to explain why text complexity is important and how to measure it in selecting a text for use in the classroom. Out of ten reading standards for each grade, one, the *Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity* standard, focuses exclusively on reading and comprehending high-complexity texts (standards available at <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>). For example, Grade 1, Standard 10 states, “With prompting and support, read prose and poetry of appropriate complexity for grade 1” (CCCS, ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.10). The implication that the texts used for other standards will also be of high complexity. The remaining standards provide generalized tasks for students: ask questions, determine meanings of words used in them, recount or retell them, compare and contrast them, determine a theme. Tasks are then determined based on the text and standards. Many of the tasks included in the standards, like comparing and contrasting, provide opportunities for teachers to engage in critical literacy practices, but critical reading of this type is not explicitly illustrated in the instructional examples. While the standards do provide an opening for teachers to implement critical literacy instruction, teachers must use their professional judgment and go beyond the requirements of the standards to design critical activities that meet the needs of their particular students.

There are many ways in which teachers can develop critical literacy experiences when starting with text: looking for places of disruption, thinking about and questioning the author’s viewpoint, and highlighting issues of power and culture are just a few ideas. An additional possibility involves using the technique of reading and critiquing multiple texts, which is commonly used in classrooms to expose students to multiple viewpoints (Behrman, 2006). Two of the fourth-grade poems, Pat Mora’s (1996/1999) “Words Free as Confetti” and Emma Lazarus’s (1883/1957) “The New Colossus,” present a unique opportunity for an in-depth examination of stereotypes, dominant ideologies, and the history of immigration and bilingualism in the United States. “Words Free as Confetti” explores the power of words; Pat Mora compares them to lemons, black cement, icicles, and rainbows, interspersing Spanish and English to express the connection between language and freedom:

*“I say yo soy libre,  
I am free  
free, free,  
free as confetti” (CCCS, Appendix B, p. 69).*

While Mora’s poem explores the importance of multiple languages and identities, “The New Colossus” describes immigrants as “your huddled masses yearning to breathe free/The wretched refuse of your teeming shore” (CCCS, Appendix B, p. 67). This pairing of poems is particularly useful in helping students to think about how immigrants are characterized in these texts and society. Comparing and contrasting these two poems allows students the opportunity to talk back to the authority of the texts from their personal experience and knowledge of immigration. Furthermore, comparing the authors’ divergent views of U.S. immigrants can

engage students with a critical and salient issue in our society.

### *Bringing in Multimedia*

Another way in which teachers can encourage critical literacy is through the inclusion of multimedia in their lessons and curriculum. Despite the overwhelming presence of media in the lives of today’s children, many students “read and interact with mainstream media without questioning the perspective, the experience, the truth, the author’s positionality, and the expertise of others” (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2005, p. 7). Recently, some scholars have argued that the CCSS represent a step forward in the integration of digital media into curricula and schools (Avila & Moore, 2012). Indeed, one of the “Key Points” in the English Language Arts standards reads: “Just as media and technology are integrated in school and life in the twenty-first century, skills related to media use (both critical analysis and production of media) are integrated throughout the standards” (Core Standards). In relation to “The New Colossus,” the Common Core suggests bringing in photographs and a virtual tour of the [Statue of Liberty](#).

A search for additional resources (outside of the CCS examples) covering immigration reveals a wide variety of media pieces; PBS.org includes a list of supplemental websites and texts, multimedia sources, and links to specific [PBS programs and articles addressing immigration](#). In extending a critical literacy pedagogy to many different forms of media and popular culture, students have the opportunity to develop valuable skills—the ability to question texts, power, identity, and institutions, and the chance to analyze the conventions and messages presented by texts in both print and digital media (Kellner & Share, 2007).

### **Starting with Task: Launching from the Standard**

The CCSS make explicit mention of reader and task as relevant to selecting text, but they simply state that this is something “to be determined locally,” with little further guidance. Because of the increasing emphasis on accountability to standards and standardized assessments in the U.S., teachers may be more successful in implementing critical literacy practices by selecting tasks that clearly build from standards. Teachers will then be able to articulate to students, parents, and administrators how their instruction meets the standards while still preparing students to be users and critics of texts.

Teachers will often have to expand upon suggestions made in the standards and appendices. In the performance tasks for fourth-grade standards, one sample task is as follows:

*Students explain the selfish behavior by Mary and make inferences regarding the impact of the cholera outbreak in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* by explicitly referring to details and examples from the text. (CCCS, Appendix B, p. 70)*

While this task is sufficient to meet requirements of the “making inferences and providing details” standard, it would

be necessary to expand on this task to situate it within critical literacy instruction. *The Secret Garden* (1911/1985) is a text that has many powerful themes that can be used for a critical literacy lesson, and one of these is the idea of power relationships. This story takes place in the 1900s in England when servitude was common in many middle class and wealthy households, which is visible in the book. For example, young Colin holds the power over all of the servants in his father's house. He makes it clear to the servants, on multiple occasions, that he has the power to relieve them of their duties at any time.

In order to analyze this issue of power within the text, teachers can ask students to explain the power relationships between the servants and their superiors and make inferences from the text about how these power relationships impacted the lives of the servants. In order to push students' thinking, it would be useful to have students learn the history of servants in England at that time so they can get a fuller context of what it might have been like for a servant. Students are then able to analyze the servant/superior relationship from the perspective of the servant.

Just like in the sample performance task, students are being asked to practice skills in comprehension, inferencing, and the use of textual evidence; however, they are also being positioned in a way that they will begin to understand that the author's perspective privileges certain viewpoints while making others invisible. Furthermore, students have the opportunity to discover that authors often approach texts with their own biases, which can be explicitly or implicitly written into their manuscripts. Here, the task is to delve into the deeper sociopolitical issues of text's setting and see how they are manifested in the text.

### TAKING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

Another way in which teachers can promote critical literacy skills involves the use of cross-curricular materials and interdisciplinary practices. This type of work is possible and beneficial for even the youngest readers and writers and provides teachers with the opportunity for reading and responding in the content areas. The CCSS emphasize the importance of distinguishing text types; in first grade, students are expected to be able to: "Explain major differences between books that tell stories and books that give information, drawing on a wide reading of a range of text types" (CCCS, RL.5). If one goal is to create critical classrooms, teachers can ask students to question the perspectives and information presented by disparate textual forms like informational texts and narrative works.

One of the text exemplars for first grade is Aliko's (1962/1989) *My Five Senses*, an informational text that helps children learn to explore the world through seeing, feeling, smelling, touching, and hearing. Although Core Standards for science education have not yet been released, a common unit in many states involves having students "observe the world of familiar objects using the senses and tools" (Tennessee GLE 0107.Inq.1). While combining *My Five Senses* with a unit on

observation and noticing provides general information about the senses and allows students to make cross-curricular connections, it may not allow for the development of critical literacy.

One way to use critical literacy in this instance is to have students explore how different people's experiences with their senses change how they view and understand the world. We suggest bringing in a story about Helen Keller that may encourage students to question the idea of how people experience the world. This could also introduce the notion of (dis)ability and the fact that some people "see" with their hands or "hear" with their eyes. There are a number of examples of age-appropriate stories about Helen Keller: *Who Was Helen Keller?*, by Gare Thompson and Nancy Harrison (2003), and *Helen Keller: Her Life in Pictures*, by George Sullivan (2007) are just two examples. Then, asking students questions like: Would Helen Keller write *The Five Senses* using the same examples? How do you experience the world in similar and different ways than other people? How would your observation of water (for example) be different if you couldn't see it? In addition to having students make interdisciplinary connections, this technique can begin a conversation about how we know what we know, and how other people might "see," "hear," and know differently.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

While the CCSS may not explicitly lay out ways that teachers can bring critical literacy instruction into their classrooms, it does leave the door open for reading and response work that allows students to interrogate and disrupt notions of power, culture, and language. The CR<sup>2</sup> framework outlined in this article provides teachers with a framework to think about multiple ways of engaging students and planning for critical literacy, but the responsibility of crafting lessons that are specific to the needs of individual students and classrooms ultimately lies with the teacher. Therefore, teachers' professional knowledge and judgment becomes even more important in the development of authentic and meaningful literacy experiences that may cause students to question their own assumptions and the world around them. We believe that critical literacy instruction represents expanded notions of literacy teaching and learning; instead of a sole focus on literacy standards and skills, teachers can develop opportunities that allow students to see themselves as users and critics of texts (Luke, 2000).

Though the majority of this article focuses on the work of teachers, we understand that instructional practices have implications for teachers and administrators alike. The push to prepare students for yearly standardized assessments and an administrator's desire to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) can lead to standardized instructional practices. Administrators often have certain "look fors" when evaluating the quality of teachers' literacy instruction, and these "look fors" may not always converge with the instructional moves of a critical literacy teacher. One of the goals of this framework is to align the interests of both critical literacy teachers and

school administrators.

The CR<sup>2</sup> framework is not a move away from standards-based instruction, but rather an alternative way of addressing standards while developing empowered critical readers and responders. While we have not answered all of the questions raised by the CCSS, with the CR<sup>2</sup> framework, we have endeavored to provide teachers with multiple entry points for critical literacy instruction that also meet the CCSS.

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