The Quality Literature Quadrant (QLQ): A Reflective Tool for Examining Stereotypes in Texts

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The Quality Literature Quadrant (QLQ): A Reflective Tool for Examining Stereotypes in Texts

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Because texts often reflect the culture and values of a society and can either disrupt or reinforce stereotypes, it is imperative that faculty and their students alike participate in critical analysis and reflection of the literature and texts used in their classrooms. Critical reflection can reveal whose voices are privileged and whose voices are left out of the literature. In this paper, the authors discuss how faculty and students can use a reflective tool--the Quality Literature Quadrant (QLQ), as a means to examine stereotypes in literature and texts.

Recent events in the United States have brought the issues of racial injustice and societal inequity to the forefront of our attention. Protests following the death of a Black man, George Floyd, at the hands of White police officers, coinciding in the middle of a global pandemic that has disproportionately killed Black-Americans, has drawn renewed attention to this country's entrenched racial divide. Beyond issues of race, American society has also witnessed recent movements related to immigration, gender and sexuality, and economic class.

With a spotlight on societal inequities, teachers cannot remain silent. Unequivocally, educators are uniquely positioned to encourage students to confront injustice and prepare them to live and work together in a diverse world. We believe books—instructional tools that are culturally, politically, and historically situated as they reflect the dominant culture and the values of the larger society (Finders, 1997; Freebody & Freiberg, 2001; Lewison, Flint, Van Sluys, 2002)—will facilitate this mission. We, as educators, must engage in critical self-reflection and think about how we consciously or unconsciously perpetuate existing texts and narratives that promote various prejudices and stereotypes.

In this paper, we introduce readers to the Quality Literature Quadrant (QLQ), a tool that can help educators reflect upon the instructional texts and materials used in their classrooms (See appendix). The tool, originally developed to discuss how gender is represented in picture books used in a pre-K classroom, can be

used within and across grade levels and content areas as a means to examine stereotypes in texts.

Theoretical Framework: Dewey and Critical Literacy

In schools and universities today, it is of utmost importance to provide opportunities and spaces to analyze and think deeply about such elements as gender, race, class, and ethnicity. However, the nuances around such areas can be tricky to navigate, especially since human beings tend to think in terms of binaries. Dewey (1938) argued, "Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities" (p. 17). We argue there is value in reflecting on the intermediate possibilities to which Dewey refers, by critically reading texts to avoid essentializing or reducing the human experience into neat or tidy categories. Therefore, we employ a critical literacy framework in this paper.

Teachers can draw upon a critical literacy framework to challenge students to reconsider the world and question if the status quo is socially just (Jones, 2006). This process involves examining multiple perspectives and focusing on issues of power, thus promoting reflection, transformation, and action (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004). By examining multiple perspectives, teachers and students are able to study the voices of those at the center and margins of texts. Critical literacy is a framework that has been used in classroom settings to problematize the privileging of some groups over others (Beach & Cleovoulou, 2014; Jones, 2006; Medina & Costa, 2013). With traditional literacy instruction, students focus on aspects of reading with the goal of understanding the literal message of the author. Students who are not taught to engage in critical literacy practices with texts, particularly students from marginalized groups, tend to read "submissively" or give the text authority (Franzak, 2006; Hall & Piazza, 2008). Critical literacy helps students become aware of the messages authors send about power, race, class, and gender (Hall & Piazza, 2008). We acknowledge representation in texts is integral to critical literacy, as research reveals the importance of students seeing themselves in the text. The QLQ interrogates the nature of implicit and explicit bias within the narratives of a text to ensure that when students see and hear themselves in a story, it is not always in a stereotypical way. By facilitating critical literacy among teachers and students, we can begin to cultivate classrooms where the status quo is questioned and equity and justice are promoted.

Nevertheless, educators may be challenged in selecting texts that represent a variety of diverse life experiences and perspectives. Therefore, we provide a

reflective tool for selecting literature in the classroom that allows instructors to act intentionally to include diverse viewpoints, identities, and backgrounds. In the next part of this paper, we explain this tool and how it can be used in the classroom.

Understanding the QLQ

The Quality Literature Quadrant (QLQ) was developed in 2016 as part of a gender picture book study in a four-year old classroom (Whitmore, Angleton, & Zuccaro, 2016). The purpose of the study involved examining how four-year-old children conceptualized gender representation in picture books. A subsequent article explored picture books through four categories: disrupting gender binaries, intersectionality, the discourse of childhood innocence, and heteronormativity. However, the authors realized very quickly they could not neatly categorize books; the characters and their life experiences deserved a tool to illustrate the nuances of the human condition and they could not essentialize or reduce their experiences into distinct groups. As a result, they developed a tool that would raise the reader's awareness to the complexities of identity (Zuccaro, Angleton, & Langston-Demott, 2017).

The QLQ is imagined as a reflective tool for educators to examine their classroom libraries and instructional texts and consider the types of identity messages made available in their classrooms. To use the tool, a teacher would gather a set of texts and then adopt a lens through which they would view the texts—gender, race, class, ability, family structure, and so on. We suggest using Post-It Notes as a tool to plot the texts around the quadrant to see what is represented in classroom libraries or classroom instruction.

The y-axis prompts the teacher to reflect on the stereotypes or narratives around that lens and whether or not the book is disrupting (the top of the y-axis) or maintaining (the bottom of the y-axis) the stereotype. For example, if a teacher adopted a gender lens, they may ask, "Is this text maintaining a stereotype about what it means to be a boy or girl?" If they believe the text maintains stereotypes, they may plot the text closer to the bottom. The next step is to examine the x-axis, or the type of narrative used in the text. The left side, explicit instruction, requires teachers to reflect on whether the text explicitly discusses or teaches a lesson about the lens (for example, "This is a book about what it is like to be a Native American"). The right side, implicit instruction, describes a text that would consist of a story that has the lens woven through (such as the protagonist is a Native American experiencing her first day of school with friends). As teachers plot all

of their texts on the QLQ, they may move previously plotted texts as a result of the reflections and conversations about the stereotypes and the type of narrative used in a text.

As an example, we use the picture book *Paperbag Princess* (Munsch, 1980) to illuminate identity nuances by telling the story of a young princess who sets off to rescue a prince who has been kidnapped by a dragon. Wearing only a paper bag, the princess outsmarts the dragon and frees the prince—only to have him criticize how dirty and unkempt she appears. Surprisingly, they do not end up happily ever after. Using the QLQ, we believe this book disrupts typical fairy tale stories where the princess needs rescuing and ends up married. However, we note the fact that the princess is a White character—the identity lens of gender is emphasized while other identity lenses are either ignored or underemphasized. After we reflected on this book, we would plan to include more texts that discuss gender and other identity lenses like race or disability, for example.

Most importantly, the QLQ is meant to be a reflective tool, not to judge a book as "good" or "bad." Once a teacher reflects on their collection of texts, they may go back to their books and rethink how texts are grouped or assigned or what texts they use during lessons. On one hand, teachers may realize they have inadvertently bought or planned with too many books that maintain stereotypes in their classroom library or their library may only have books that teach lessons about groups of people, rather than stories with diverse protagonists and families. Teachers may find they have an equitable representation of identity in their libraries as well--the idea is to continuously reflect on the collection of texts in their classroom for whose voices are centered or marginalized.

Reflective Teaching: Moving Forward

Through efforts to use the QLQ in our respective classrooms this upcoming academic year, we seek to raise students' awareness of stereotypes and identity messages in the texts we make available in our teaching. Future iterations and use of the tool will further investigate how user subjectivity plays a part in analyzing a particular text.
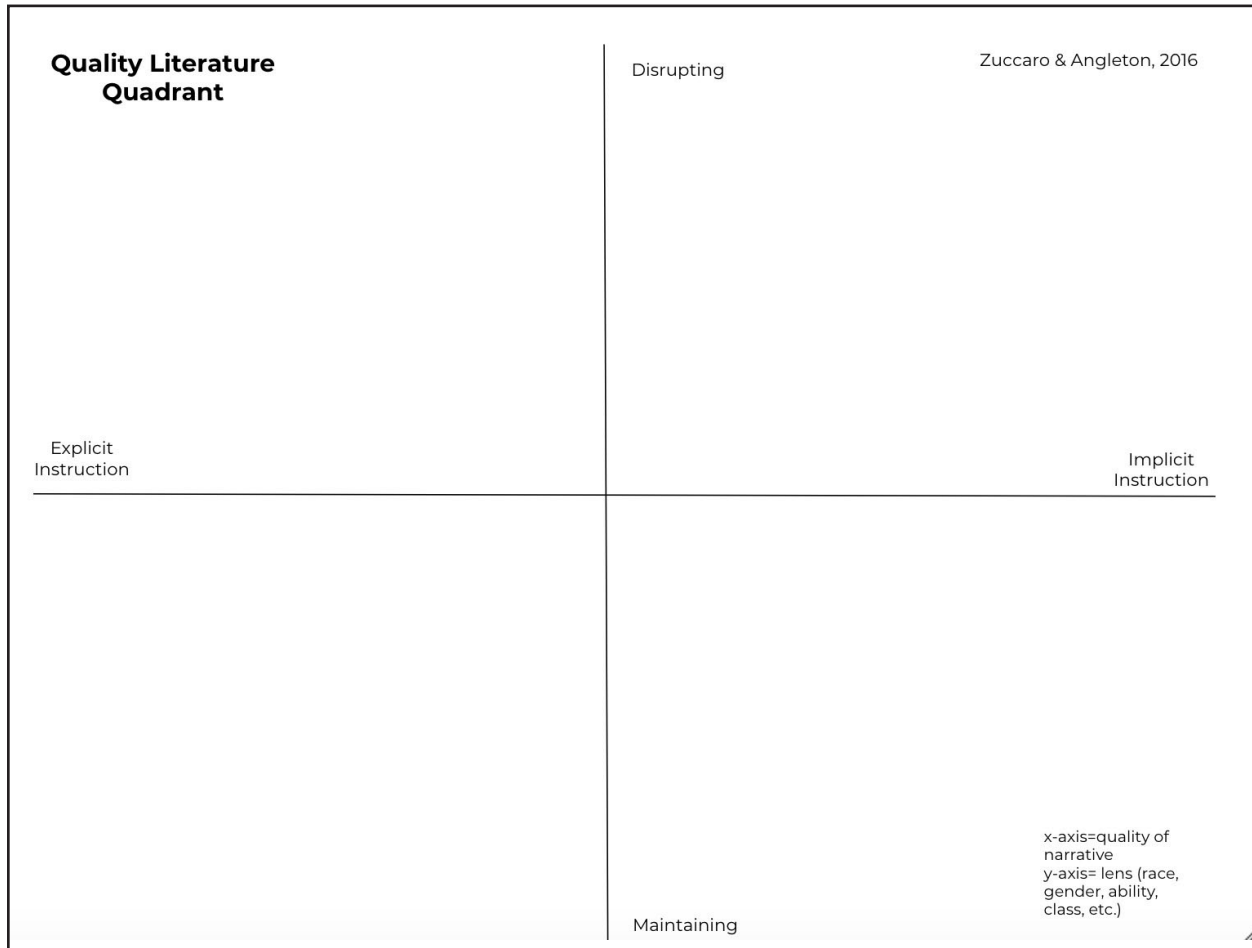
 The first author will use the tool in an undergraduate children's literature course. Students complete an end-of-course text set and they will use the QLQ to reflect on their text sets around identity and stereotypes. In the second author's Culturally Responsive Perspectives course, students will participate in a focused book study of *The 57* Bus by Dashka Slater. The book tells the story

of a crime committed against a genderqueer teenager by an African-American male. Students will use the QLQ as a framework for discussing the ways in which gender, identity, race, and class are presented within the story. Within the third author's social studies teaching methods, students will be presented with a variety of children's literature centered on issues of race, class, gender, Appalachia, immigration, and a variety of other topics. Each student will have an opportunity to analyze several pieces of literature using the QLQ and afterwards discuss how the QLQ allows them to be more purposeful and deliberate in literature choices in their classroom. Ultimately, we envision the QLQ as a tool to help educators and their students critically reflect on their readings and therefore, promote equity, inclusion, and justice in our classrooms and beyond.

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Appendix

Quality Literature Quadrant

Disrupting

Zuccaro & Angleton, 2016

Explicit Instruction

Implicit Instruction

x-axis=quality of narrative
y-axis= lens (race, gender, ability, class, etc.)

Maintaining

Quality Literature Quadrant