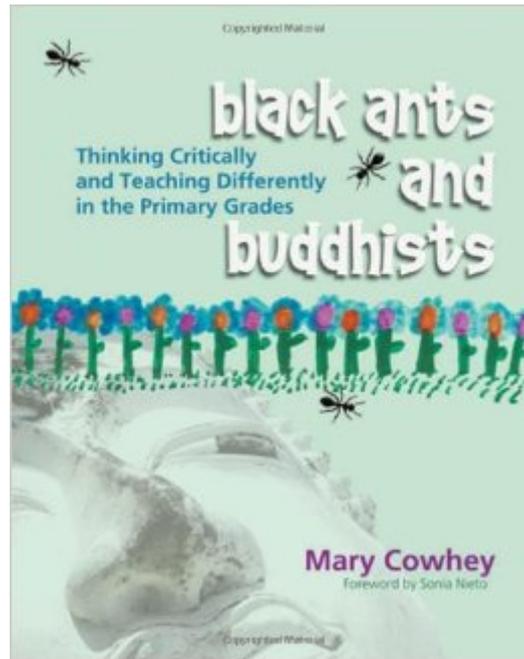


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# Black Ants And Buddhists: Thinking Critically And Teaching Differently In The Primary Grades



## Synopsis

What would a classroom look like if understanding and respecting differences in race, culture, beliefs, and opinions were at its heart? Welcome to Mary Cowhey's Peace Class in Northampton, MA, where first and second graders view the entire curriculum through the framework of understanding the world, and trying to do their part to make it a better place. Woven through the book is Mary's unflinching and humorous account of her own roots in a struggling large Irish Catholic family and her early career as a community activist. Mary's teaching is infused with lessons of her heroes: Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Martin Luther King, and others. Her students learn to make connections between their lives, the books they read, the community leaders they meet, and the larger world. If you were inspired to become a teacher because you wanted to change the world, and instead find yourself limited by teach-to-the-test pressures, this is the book that will make you think hard about how you spend your time with students. It offers no easy answers, just a wealth of insight into the challenges of helping students think critically about the world, and starting points for conversations about diversity and controversy in your classroom, as well as in the larger community.

## Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Stenhouse Publishers; 1 edition (April 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1571104186

ISBN-13: 978-1571104182

Product Dimensions: 7.4 x 0.6 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (44 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #47,343 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #27 in [Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Instruction Methods > Social Studies](#) #152 in [Books > Textbooks > Education > Elementary Education](#) #216 in [Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Certification & Development](#)

## Customer Reviews

I have just finished one of the best books about teaching that I have ever read. It is written by a teacher of first and second graders, but the work she does with these culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse children goes far beyond the work covered in most high school AP courses.

Whether you are a teacher or not, whether you teach first grade or graduate school, I highly, highly, highly recommend this book.

I own this book and used it during my master's classes in education. It is a wonderful text to get you thinking about the different ways social studies and the world can be presented to your students while still meeting standards. I highly recommend it just for the sheer joy of the love of teaching Mary Cowhey teaches us!

I have recommended this book to everyone I know who interacts with children, including a high school student who is completing an internship at her adjoining elementary school. I've also given the book to parents because it presents wonderful ways of relating to children. I am appalled by the lockstep, test-taking, "start them out of the womb" approach that so many are advocating as education these days. I am very worried about children experiencing the current educational system. So many of them are wounded and under-encouraged to learn. They are being taught to take tests, cheat and play the system. That is not learning. Children need the opportunity to think, create and have fun, and *Black Ants and Buddhists* is a brilliant example of true learning. Mary Cowhey recognizes that children are quite capable of understanding complex issues if presented in a way that allows for their participation. When reviewers accuse her of pushing her political agenda or unduly influencing children in age-inappropriate ways, I think they are underestimating the abilities of these children to understand the world and to make their own judgements about social issues. If you notice, the children don't always agree with her or with each other; it's in talking it through that they all learn something. I only wish that all teachers were like Mary Cowhey. I am currently writing a book about teaching (30 years of using activity based methods with adults) and I am using this book as part of my research because the same techniques she uses with children apply to adults. We all learn best when we are engaged, excited and having a good time.

There are definitely elements of this book I like: her use of field trips, her ability to build collaborative relationships with parents and then bring them into her classroom for projects and lessons, her creative projects and many attempts to make her children feel empowered. I also really liked the way that she reads a picture book once a week that she feels will encourage some kind of lively discussion about the world - friendship, courage, social issues, etc. BUT, I agree (and I am super liberal and very interested in anti-bias education) that much of her teaching was \*deeply developmentally inappropriate and actually very biased (just with the opposite bias than the

"traditional" ones of textbooks twenty or thirty years ago). Her book is super preachy and I was left wondering what the children did all day besides have intense conversations about how horrible Jefferson is because he owned slaves. I'm all for re-thinking our historical myths (e.g. that the Founding Fathers were some kind of saints), but I personally believe peace work, which the author is obsessed with, more comes from being able to listen and understand another's perspective in a way that doesn't cast them as villains, even if some of their actions look pretty horrible from our modern lens. I really was not a fan of this book overall. It made me feel that the author really should have stayed in her former job of political organizing rather than using her job as a teacher of young children to politicize them. She may not realize it, but she is actually doing the same thing as the teachers of long ago did to her, which she bemoans at various points. She is quite actively pushing a particular political agenda on \*6! year olds. I really was left just wanting to hear that she reads her kids Shel Silverstein and Winnie the Pooh occasionally, too. I hope that she does.

I am learning so much about learning styles and how to really help the kids to understand what you are teaching. It's great.

This book is something that should be required reading for every future educator. Mary Cowhey has a way with words and a way of relating her life to what happens in the classroom- truly, after reading this book, most of my doubts about being a teacher who can impact students' lives were lifted. I really cannot say enough good things about this book. It's not pretentious, it isn't preachy- it's very real. Realness is what is needed in this changing educational climate. Please check this book out- keep it on your book shelf. One of the few textbooks I'm thankful for having to purchase- a book I'll cherish for the rest of my life.

I have really enjoyed reading through this well-written, easy flowing text for my pre-service teaching course. Author has reminded me that teaching is not only a job but has responsibilities and privileges to be embraced. While the specifics may not be replicable in a classroom, the ideals are. I recommend this book highly to those wanting to embrace strategic thinking in the classroom, and how to integrate the everyday into lessons, planned or spontaneously.

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