

# Facilitating Conversations on Difficult Topics in the Classroom: Teachers' Stories of Opening Spaces Using Children's Literature

## *Introduction*

Mollie Welsh Kruger

Susie Rolander

Susan Stires

## *Essays by*

Carolina Soto Bonds

Catherine-Laura Dunnington

Shoshana Magnet

Kerry Elson

Kindel Turner Nash

Ysaaca D. Axelrod

Denise Ives

Rachel Weaver

Noreen N. Rodríguez

Shelby Brody

Kathryn Struthers Ahmed

Nida Ali

Chiara Di Lello

Carla España

Arianna Banack

Stephen Adam Crawley

Cara E. Furman

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# Facilitating Conversations on Difficult Topics in the Classroom: Teachers' Stories of Opening Spaces Using Children's Literature

Mollie Welsh Kruger, Susie Rolander, and Susan Stires

Educators have long extolled the brilliance of Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) and her exploration of how books can serve as both mirrors and windows for children—mirrors in which children can see themselves and windows that widen their world. What if we broadened her formulation to include the realm of conversation? We assert that books are the base and what follows is the possibility of rich, deep conversations in classrooms.

For this edition of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series*, we invited educators to share stories from their practice: times when they utilized children's literature and conversations to address real life; the difficult topics that children experience through the mirror of their own experiences or the windows of their peers, communities, or world.

As guest editors for this issue, we (Mollie, Susie, and Susan) are strongly influenced by Bank Street College, an institution that values the intersection of academic learning and the real world. In fact, the credo states, "The mission of Bank Street College is to improve the education of children and their teachers by applying to the education process all available knowledge about learning and growth and by connecting teaching and learning meaningfully to the outside world" (Mitchell, 1951).

This edition underscores these beliefs. These stories are the stories of educators who have tried, and sometimes stumbled, and are showing us their vulnerabilities. In each story, there is profound learning from the conversations that emerge from books.

From its inception, Bank Street College of Education has recognized the value of narrative and the importance of using children's literature, together with a focus on social justice and critical inquiry. The Bank Street philosophy, also referred to as the developmental-interaction approach, is centered in constructivism, wherein learners maintain a curious stance and create deep meaning by participating in a community of learners (Nager & Shapiro, 2000).

Two historical groups of educators embody these values regarding children's literature and the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach. In 1937, Bank Street's founder Lucy Sprague Mitchell started the **Writers Lab**, supporting children's book authors in their creations, specifically with consideration for the development of young children. In addition, for over 100 years, the Bank Street Children's Book Committee has crafted lists of the **Best Books of the Year** to provide resources to families, educators, and librarians.

Although the topic of this edition has been explored in other academic journals—for example, *Young Children* published Mankiw and Strasser's "Tender Topics: Exploring Sensitive Issues with Pre-K through First Grade through Read-Alouds" in March 2013—the exploration of sometimes contentious topics using children's literature with students continues to present challenges for teachers and teacher educators. *Language Arts* has been addressing these challenges in unthemed issues for the last couple of years by including essays and research on gender/sexuality, death/grief, homelessness, and disabilities.

As we write in the late summer of 2020, we are in the midst of both a global pandemic and a global movement for racial justice. We cannot help but be mindful that there is an urgency to our work with many of these topics at the local, national, and global levels and at all stages of education.

In our work as literacy teacher educators devoted to social justice and to meeting our students' needs, we have had numerous meaningful conversations with pre-service teacher candidates about using children's literature in relation to difficult topics. Sometimes we initiated these conversations, and at other times, they were brought to the classes by the students or by world events. These are the same portals through which such topics arose in our classrooms when we taught elementary students; that is, some were teacher-generated and some student-generated.

Susie, as an elementary reading specialist, often chose read-alouds to bring issues to the students—in a way similar to the efforts described by Ted Kesler and colleagues (2020) on teaching social justice through interactive read-alouds. A picture book that generated meaningful and intense discussion with younger students was *Malala's Magic Pencil* by Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai (2017), which focuses on girls' rights. With older elementary students, Susie explored housing and food insecurity via *Crenshaw* by Katherine Applegate (2015), the story of a worried 10-year-old boy and his imaginary friend, Crenshaw, a cat.

Mollie's seminal experience occurred when she was a second grade teacher and was student-generated. 7-year-old Diamond approached her and said, "I have a secret." Her tone was not playful; she was hesitant and serious, but she seemed grateful to be able to confide her secret: the woman who dropped her off at school every day was not her mother, but her foster mother. From her read-aloud bookshelf, Mollie pulled out Jacqueline Woodson's (2002) book, *Our Gracie Aunt*. It is the story of two siblings who are left at home by their mother who struggles with mental health issues. Mollie presented this compelling book to Diamond, who was vehement in her insistence on sharing it with her classmates. There was rich discussion during and after the reading, establishing many connections around the experience of important people in our lives leaving us in one way or another. Teachers can never be completely sure where the conversation about books leads us; it depends on the students, their experiences, and wonderings.

Susan recalls both teacher-generated and student-generated topics and the use of children's literature, especially during her last years as a primary teacher. However, the most significant experience, from which a brief but intense emergent curriculum arose, was generated by a student and the "literature" was his own text. The issue, animal rights, was close to his heart. He convinced his classmates that hunting (as could be observed in rural Maine where the students lived) violated those rights. What followed were lively discussions, the making of protest signs, and some involvement of other perspectives.

We know that our experiences were common and continue to be so, but that doesn't mean that these situations are easy for teachers. Our decision to offer an issue on this immensely important topic was motivated by the hope of bringing more voices of teachers and teacher educators to it. The response has been varied and rich, with more essays submitted than we were able to publish. We are hopeful that this selection of twelve essays will meet at least some of the concerns that our readers have.

In the range of stories that we offer you in this issue, there is one commonality: teachers are responding to the challenges that students of all ages face in their lives. These include concerns about gender and sexuality, racism, death and grief, climate change, police brutality, class issues, trauma, family insecurity,

and mental health challenges. The essays are arranged in pairs by age/grade levels from preschool, to early elementary, middle elementary, late elementary, middle school, high school, and college. In the cases where one of the authors is an elementary teacher writing with a college or university teacher, we grouped the essay in the elementary range. It is our belief, however, that every one of these authors offers thoughtful guidance to educators (and non-educators), no matter the level with which they most identify.

Our stories begin in preschool, one (“Storytime Is a Sunrise”) in the classroom of author Carolina Soto Bonds and her students, and the other (“Angry Like Me”) in three sites where two researchers, Catherine Dunnington and Shoshanna Magnet, and six teachers collaborated. Bonds’ comprehensive narrative is told over most of a year when Will (all student and family names are pseudonyms) was in her classroom. Her lyrical telling of her experience with Will is deep, moving, introspective, and informative, as only a lived experience can be.

Dunnington and Magnet provide a stirring vignette of what occurred when Kaleb experienced the read-aloud of a “disquieting” text that they used in their research. They offer the vignette as an example of what may be experienced or “provoked” by such a read-aloud. Most important, they provide the extensive thinking and the scholarship behind their research and its outcomes.

Kerry Elson and Kindel Turner Nash (“Taking a Journey to The Land of All”) and Ysaaca Axelrod, Denise Ives, and Rachel Weaver (“We Are All Learning about Climate Change”) recognize that young children have big questions about their world. They highlight the role that children’s literature can play in helping young children develop deeper understandings. Elson and Turner Nash together, as teacher and teacher educator, model a reflective process in this work. After observing some student play in the block area, Elson developed a curriculum centered on gender identity and expression, utilizing children’s literature. She reflected on that process with Turner Nash, her thought partner.

Axelrod and Ives (two teacher educators), joined by Weaver (their pre-service teaching student), note that environmental education academics have focused on climate change for decades, yet young children were often not believed to be ready for the conversation. The authors detail the reimaging of their work to include climate change and climate justice in their elementary teacher education program. In their piece, they document the experiences and lessons learned.

The middle elementary articles, third to sixth grade, see a developmental increment in the topics explored. Noreen N. Rodríguez (“Focus on Friendship or Fights for Civil Rights? Teaching the Difficult History of Japanese American Incarceration through *The Bracelet*”) and Shelby Brody (“Gender-Inclusive Children’s Literature as a Preventative Measure: Moving Beyond a Reactive Approach to LGBTQ+ Topics in the Classroom”) explore teaching about Japanese American incarceration and studies in gender expansiveness, respectively. Rodríguez observed two teachers’ read-aloud practice around the same text; her data documents how the teachers took very different approaches to introducing young learners to the racist American history of Japanese internment.

Shelby Brody writes about adopting a more responsive approach to students’ wonderings and language about gender identity and gender expression. Brody developed a curriculum on gender expansiveness, writing from their own experience of being non-gender binary queer and responding to a student’s slur. The essay reviews the children’s literature that is available on the topic and advocates for space where queer identities are embedded within the curriculum.

In our first upper elementary selection, a fourth-grade pre-service teacher and her instructor write about how to be better equipped to address unexpected questions or comments that arise around read-alouds. Kathryn Struthers Ahmed and Nida Ali (“What Do You Do When You Don’t Know How to Respond?”) delve into strategies teachers can use when difficult topics and comments come up, while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of these startling situations.

This piece is followed by Chiara Di Lello (“Choosing Difficult, Choosing Important in Fifth-Grade Read-Aloud”). Di Lello shows us her vulnerability as she reflects on falling short in her goal of choosing more books by authors of color for her class read-alouds. She describes reading *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia (2010) with her students. What follows is a rich analysis of the discussions her class subsequently had about the Black Panthers in the summer of 1968 in Oakland, California. She leads us through these interactions, revealing both her comfort and discomfort, and helping us to grapple with the complexities and importance of such discussions.

Teachers of adolescents Carla España (“Shattering, Healing, Dreaming”) and Arianna Banack (“Discussing Race, Policing, and Privilege in a High School Classroom”) both tell stories of teaching and learning about racism in the larger society. Specifically, for España and her students in middle school, the focus is on the connection of race, class, and gender, while for Banack and her high school students, it is on race, white privilege, and police brutality. Both teachers are conscious of their own identities and provide openings for the students through the literature they offer and the activities and discussions that they promote. Both offer narratives of their students and their enacted planned curricula. For España, who partially shares the identity of many of her students, there is less tension in her story than there is for Banack, who reflects critically on her racial identity and on what she might have done differently. In the end, these educators offer plans for their future work with students, including adolescents and pre-service teachers.

Our final two pieces focus on the learning of pre-service teachers within their teacher preparation programs. In the first article, Stephen Crawley (“If I Knew Then What I Do Now”), muses on how the world of children’s literature has changed and grown since he was a classroom teacher. As a teacher of teachers, he strives to facilitate his students’ knowledge of and use of children’s literature to enable deep conversations with children.

Finally, Cara Furman (“Conversations about Death that are Provoked by Literature”) presents a story of how teachers can have conversations with young children about death, conversations that are provoked by descriptions or images of death in children’s literature. Interestingly, Furman asserts that when addressing unplanned conversations, teachers need to go “against three conventions in literacy education: close reading, staying on task, and appropriate school talk.”

Together, the authors of these essays and stories, along with their students, offer evidence of both strengths and vulnerabilities in facing the challenges in today’s world—the same ones you might be sharing with your own students. First comes the acknowledgement that these conditions exist, next the sense of responsibility to meet them head on, and finally, the implementation. Sometimes these situations have a long incubation period, giving teachers time to plan and develop curriculum; other times they happen suddenly, and we are caught unaware but need to respond quickly. We hope that this issue will give its audience the foresight and the tools to generate a planned curriculum to meet their students’ needs, along with the capacity to respond in the moment and grasp an emergent curriculum and its possibilities.

The role of children's literature has been explored many times in the academic field. What is different about this issue is that through the stories of our colleagues we become, in essence, a learning community. Louise Rosenblatt (1982) illuminates the importance of "the reciprocal interplay of reader and text." What do you, the reader, bring to each of these accounts? By presenting these powerful stories, we are not prescribing a certain, right way to use literature, but many ways that you can use it. It is the interaction that you have with these stories that is important: *your reflection* about how you can grow alongside a community of learners. So we view this not as a static document but one that grows with each reader's engagement: reading, reflecting, practicing, and passing it on.

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## Additional Resources

- [Schomburg Center's Black Liberation](#)
- [Children's Book Committee](#)
- [We Need Diverse Books](#)

## About the Authors



**Mollie Welsh Kruger** taught second grade in a Harlem public school for 18 years and five years prior in a Tremont parochial early childhood classroom. Both positions offered insights across cultural experiences and led Mollie to understandings of culturally sustaining pedagogies. While teaching elementary school, professional development opportunities included learning experiences that incorporated art into academic learning and explored the workshop model of writing and reading, which fold into her work at Bank Street. Mollie's academic interests include children's literature, students' funds of knowledge, the arts in education, and urban education. Currently, she serves as co-chair of the Bank Street College Children's Book Committee.



**Susie Rolander** began her life as an educator in Sonoma County, California, teaching and learning from amazing kindergarten students in a school where 20 different languages were spoken. In the dual-language program, Susie taught her students exclusively in Spanish while another teacher taught the English portion. (Her students didn't even know she could speak English!) After moving to New York City, she studied at and graduated from the Literacy Program at Bank Street Graduate School of Education. For ten years, she worked in a New York City public school as a literacy specialist, where the most delightful part of her job was connecting students with books. She has instructed and learned from graduate students at Bank Street for the past 10 years, first as an adjunct, and then as faculty. Consistently, her students' favorite part of class is when she reads aloud a children's book to end the class.



As a faculty member of the Graduate School at Bank Street College, **Susan Stires** taught writing, reading, language, and children's literature courses. She was also a lecturer at Teachers College, Columbia University, and a staff developer in New York City schools, following 30 years as an elementary school teacher. Along with a book, *With Promise*, she is the author of numerous chapters and articles on working with young students for whom literacy is often compromised. In her retirement, she has been providing literacy support at Juniper Hill School for Place-Based Education, which was founded by her daughter, Anne Stires, in 2010.



# Storytime is a Sunrise: Employing Children’s Literature to Mediate Socio-Emotional Challenges in the Life of a Young Child

*Carolina Soto Bonds*

Storytime is a sunrise. Every storytime is sketched in hope—the hope that messages come across, meaning is made, synapses fire, and smiles ignite. Sometimes the colors of storytime are a smooth ephemeral palette of blending colors, a sunrise of consolatory, reassuring intent. Sometimes, reading to young children is a wild exploration painted in bursting, vivid colors, a celebration of jubilation, childhood, and freedom.

I relish the times of day when we gather on the rug, a book in my hands, and words stream from the page, out of my voice, into little hearts. Often, kids inch closer, a few cuddle into the nook of my side, and the echoes of ancient, primal storytelling and listening drown out the social constructs that keep us partitioned. The words are often a sinuous tendril of black letters, phonemes, an invisible rope used to climb out of or swing into anything. It is always an opportunity to introduce content, to make ideas more accessible, and to shape narratives.

Suvilehto (2019) considers teachers’ use of literature to bring up social and emotional issues to be a kind of therapeutic healing, or bibliotherapy:

Many teachers in day care and at school practice bibliotherapy in some manner, often without giving their practice a formal name. However, effective follow-up activities, thoughtful questions, and focused discussions require that teachers are mindful about their use of books to address individual and group issues. (p. 1)

While teachers do not necessarily practice the structured, clinical approach of bibliotherapy, the strategy of employing literature to access difficult conversations with children is a powerful and effective tool. Because how teachers work with literature does not have a specific name and there are no formal, studied examples of our practice, it is useful to refer to bibliotherapy as an influential framework to address challenging situations in students’ lives. Suvilehto (2019) also notes that, “[a] focus on bibliotherapy as ‘healing words’ is an acknowledgement of children as capable, complete, equal citizens and also productive members of society” (p. 2).

Using books to generate difficult conversations with children is also an exercise in ethics. We are bound to question whether what we do might veer off into clinical work. As teachers, we are often unlicensed, unprepared pediatric and family therapists; we are medical unprofessionals, actors, writers, caretakers, content creators, servers—and it’s hard.

However, it is important to note the distinctions. Bibliotherapy is a structured, careful, and highly informed multi-step process that takes place after significant bureaucratic intervention. On the other hand, using books to discuss tough topics with children is usually a teacher’s more informal attempt to deal with a student’s socio-emotional suffering. This supportive practice aims to offer students insight into what may be happening in their lives or in the social environment around them, and there is no expected outcome,

only hope. As a facilitator of their experience with literature, I hope to offer students some moments of clarity.

### **Knowing Will**

When I met Will (a pseudonym), his smile seemed bigger than his little body. His sunny cap of hair always gleamed like his eyes. Will was a charmer. He was vibrant, effervescent, animated. He was one of the most brilliant children I had ever worked with. At just over 3, he had an extensive vocabulary, displayed exceptional pre-computational math skills, and zoomed past most of our class in almost every academic domain. His behavior, on the other hand—his attention span and social-emotional development—was riddled with nooks and crannies. Nonetheless, when he came to school every day, his smart uniform was always crisp and clean. It was clear he was well loved.

I knew Will lived most of the time with his mother and grandmother and saw his father rarely. Will's mother was a slight, lovely woman. Her honeyed voice was almost a whisper. Once, during a routine phone call, she revealed that there were times, after sending him off on a yellow school bus, that she lay in bed in a dark room for the rest of the day.

This admission began filling in the blank canvas I had of Will's home life. And then, over several weeks, Will's behavior, which could be characterized as playful, impish at times, morphed into an unmanageable, unyielding barricade of uncompromising "No's!" He refused to have his pull-ups changed and he refused to put on his coat to go home. He screeched in anger at having to sit at a table to eat. Everything was a "No!" He shook his head from side to side rapidly, putting his hand up in a "Stop!" when anything was requested of him. When we asked what he wanted to do, offering several choices, the answer was always "No!"

My first instinct was to consider what his mother had mentioned and explore the possibility that Will was dealing with some change in his life. I couldn't imagine anything else but a change in circumstances that would warrant such a change in him.

On a cold December day, his mother came to see me, to make up a parent-teacher conference she had missed. I assured her that we could talk over the phone, but she insisted on coming in. When we met, she always showed a big toothy smile, but there was a sadness etched into her face and embedded in her eyes. As we sat and talked, no matter how much I praised Will's accomplishments, she cried. She cried about her frustrations with his behavior, and told me about her struggles with him. She cried about her frustrations with Will's father and his absence. She said she needed support and asked for counseling. Her tears were heartbreaking and her desperation spoke of a need I was not sure I could handle.

Trying to find the balance between staying appropriately bright and showing concern wasn't easy. Choking down my unsolicited opinions, I said as confidently as I could, "Everything's going to be okay." Neither of us really knew if things would work out, but there was melancholy hope. I sent Will home several days later with a note in his bookbag, listing resources our school offered.

Will, and many other kids, are born into lives where adult circumstances unrelentingly smack them in the face. The image of chubby cheeks stained with reality is deplorable, jarring, and uncomfortable, but it is real. For many little ones, childhood isn't a delicate prism of light and opalescence. Childhood is often gritty and unmerciful. We lie to ourselves when we ignore this; veiling the ugly parts in gossamer. We do children an injustice and we disrespect their truth.

Weeks later, when Will's behavior was becoming increasingly challenging, his mother called. She said she and her mother were sick, so Will had been staying with family members and close friends. His behavior began to make sense now. Will was uprooted, displaced. Physically, he was well, but he cried and screamed every day when it was time to leave school. He would be red with anger and his voice hoarse. Often he had to be carried out of the building onto the bus by me or other teachers. He refused every material, activity, or food that was offered throughout the day. His days consisted of running around the classroom, playing with toys he chose for a few minutes at a time before moving onto the next one, or crouching by our front door with his hands tucked into his body, his eyes huge and round as he shook his head, "No."

Gentleness always broke him. His loud defiant "No!" would spiral down from harsh barks and crumble into unintelligible screeches, then whispers, then whimpers. I often held him until his fury was no longer a threat to himself or others. He'd melt a little into my arms, and I could feel tears burn the back of my eyes—feeling the contradiction between being such a flawed, sensitive human when I should be a professional, ideal teacher. Sometimes, my neck was a cradle to the back of his head for a few minutes—other times, he would race off as if nothing had happened, and push me away as if growing impatient with kindness. At almost 4 years old, like an old soul, he held on to the armament of distance.

I thought about him a lot, and his behavior made perfect sense. His oppositions and objections were really the only grip he had on control in a world where he could control nothing else. I tried to disentangle the puzzle of what he must be feeling—anger, sadness, confusion, exhaustion, fear. I know he achingly missed his mother, his grandmother, and his stability. Many of us might underestimate that. Maslow (1943) says,

Confronting the average child with new, unfamiliar, strange, unmanageable stimuli or situations will too frequently elicit the danger or terror reaction, as for example, getting lost or even being separated from the parents for a short time, being confronted with new faces, new situations or new tasks, the sight of strange, unfamiliar or uncontrollable objects, illness or death. (p. 378)

In a life where adults pay hard-earned money for rushes of excitement, coveting spontaneity or newness, to a young child, routine, sameness, and stability are everything. Not only do they mean safety, they offer a solid, secure base (Bowlby, 1905) for children to gain the courage it takes to step out and explore the world. I thought about Erikson's psychosocial stages of development and the importance of trust, "and the interruption of emotional development as it relates to a stable home environment and attachment to caregivers" (Erikson, 1950, p.247). I knew it would be difficult to help organize the pieces of Will's life to where they made sense to him again—but if his time in our classroom was the only constant, then I would try. Another resource for me, in thinking about how to support Will, was Maslow's (1943) theory on human motivation. He says,

Another indication of the child's need for safety is his preference for some kind of undisrupted routine or rhythm. He seems to want a predictable, orderly world. For instance, injustice, unfairness, or inconsistency... seems to make a child feel anxious and unsafe. This attitude may be not so much because of the injustice per se or any particular pains involved, but rather because this treatment threatens to make the world look unreliable, or unsafe, or unpredictable. Young children seem to thrive better under a system which has at least a skeletal outline of rigidity, in which there is a schedule of a kind, some sort of routine, something that can be counted upon, not only for the present but also far into the future. (p. 377)

## Reading for Will

Teaching had brought me to similar moments again and again. I had used storytimes to discuss, soothe, and teach in the past. While students' cultures, funds of knowledge, strengths, needs, and developmental stages generally inform curriculum and provide me with a point of reference to construct a plan, in my experience, impromptu explorations—often lessons guided by student's lives and their present—render the deepest connections and most meaningful success. I refrain from using bibliotherapy terminology to describe the strategies I used in this situation because I am not a clinician. But I strongly believe in the power of literature to nourish children in a way my words alone cannot.

There is a great deal of support for this perspective. "Pardeck saw the therapeutic intervention for children using books both as a clinical tool and a practical tool for personal growth, tackling problems such as anger, fear... loss and transition," (Baraitser, 2014, p. 86). Heath and colleagues (2005) note, "it is very appropriate for teachers to use stories to assist students in learning life skills" (p. 5). And Shrodes (1955) reminds us:

Materials need to be carefully selected to meet students' individual needs so that students can identify with the characters and learn that they are not alone in dealing with a particular problem. (p., 24, as cited in Myracle, 1995, n.p.)

I began our foray into some literary healing by reading *The Colour Monster* by Anna Llenas (2015). This story attributes emotions to colors—yellow is happiness, blue is sad, red is fiery anger, black is afraid, and green is calm. Color Monster's friend helps him make sense of his mixed-up feelings, encouraging emotional literacy. Through this book, we explored feelings in a lighthearted way that had Will giggling at the beautiful, relatable illustrations—they were familiar-looking and new at the same time. He seemed excited every time I turned the pages, and for five minutes, he was attentive. During choice time, I left *The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr (2005) and *The Colour Monster* sprawled on a table with paper and crayons next to them. *The Feelings Book* describes how a wide range of feelings, slight or complex, can come and go, supporting an acknowledgement and acceptance of them. For days, Will zoomed around the room as usual, stopping sometimes before the table for a few seconds to watch as other students looked through the books and drew. He always darted off again, but no matter where he was in the room, his eyes would wander back to the colorful books for a few treasured seconds.

During circle time one morning, in a frenzied blur, Will grabbed *The Colour Monster* from the bookshelf, holding it up and away from himself like a prize. In the middle of our "Good Morning" song, he threw open the book and looked intensely at the pages, his brows furrowed. The other kids looked at him and then at me, then back at him, some losing their clapping rhythm, their incredulity palpable. I tried not to look at him and instead continued to sing for the other students, but my voice wavered.

The next day during storytime, Will's interest secured, I brought out *My Happy Sad Mummy* by Michelle Vasiliu (2015). Told through a child's lens, this story features a mom who is very happy some days and very sad other days. Dad, alongside grandparents, lift up the child while mom takes care of her health. When mom returns, her love is always the same. To introduce this deliberate a text so soon might have seemed a little hasty even to me, but I took the win from the day before and ran with it. While I battled nervousness and apprehension in putting forth content that might seem complex, grim, and could very well miss the mark, taking a risk was simply part of trying to help. My hope here was that, "because readers can become emotionally involved in a character's struggle, they [would] gain understanding about their own situation through carefully selected literature," (McEncroe, 2007, p. 4).

The moment I read the title, Will mouthed the words, and for the first time in a long while, he was riveted. His eyes were big and wide on his face, his lids barely blinking as I turned the pages. I'd glance at him as I read the text, often seeing his eyes move searchingly, ravenously along the pages. On some pictures, his eyes didn't move at all. As I closed the book, the illustrations depicted in soft washes of color were put away and there was no discussion—the children seemed to want to get away from everything the book brought forward as soon as possible, which was fine. Even as I questioned my choice of such a gut-wrenching topic, I remembered a challenge could never be easy. And I reminded myself that this was for Will.

I remember that night vividly because I could not sleep. Will was a constant character in my restless dreams. It wasn't the first time a student's troubles had kept me up. I was wracked with anxiety. Although it seemed as if he were becoming more open to unraveling the skein of his life, I couldn't shake the feeling that as I inched closer to an attempt to help him, I was growing closer to touching the issue of mental health, which was a sore one for me.

As someone who experiences anxiety myself, taking care of others is complex. Dealing with anyone else's mental health struggles when you do not want to confront your own is the real band-aid. Throughout my day, the words, "it's okay, you're okay—everything is okay," leave my lips a hundred times. They are the proverbial band-aid. They resolve anything from a little boo-boo to crying over a pilfered toy. Slapping on a superficial bandage becomes survival. Digging through the wounds that comprise mental health baggage to find healing would otherwise be too deep, too much of a gory, messy thing to sprawl out on the clean classroom floor. As an educator or a parent, sometimes looking outward—outside of yourself, caring for others and comforting children—evolves into survival. And that is because sometimes, introspection seems to be a dangerous thing.

For me, old experiences bridged to this one. Some years ago I used *The Colors of Us* by Karen Katz (2002) to illustrate to a little girl what love for her brown skin might look like after she refused to play with dolls her own color. This influential moment led me down a cultural, ethnic, social justice renaissance and a reconvergence with who I am as a woman of color. Most recently, I wielded *Hair Love* by Matthew A. Cherry (2019) to slay the fears a student had about her vivacious curls. I have always loved books where students see themselves represented. They hold up a gilded mirror by which children may feel visible, important, and a part of the world—intertwined and invested, not standing on the sidelines. It helps them develop a sense of ownership and leadership, empowering them to shepherd their lives.

And while I have used literature for children to discuss potentially difficult or complex topics like skin color, hair texture, ethnicity, culture, self-love, racism, homelessness, abuse—this was different. In the past, there had been a sense of safe dissociation because many of the issues didn't pertain to my personal life. And when the issues of culture, hair, and skin color came up and they spoke to my own experience, well, I'd been armored, I was equipped. I had dealt with these issues inside and out my whole life and I had strong convictions and quick responses.

But what happens when a student's life is plagued by something that you as a teacher haven't resolved in yourself? For all intents and purposes, mental health obstacles comprise a giant thing that is invisible. Sure, sometimes we see the physical ravages of its effects—but more often than not, it is a silent, inconspicuous weight many of us carry. How could I teach about this when there was so much more for me to learn? I relied a lot on reflection on how to go about it. While reflection is usually a vital methodology for educators, in this instance, I was anxious about my anxiety and my facade of words: "You're ok—everything is ok."

Will's reality threatened my own and I was afraid to be real. I figured the only way to progress was to proceed. I could not just forget about introducing all these books because they made *me* uncomfortable. They were needed.

In the next days, we continued to dissect *My Happy Sad Mummy*, and I would leave it out on the table with paper, much like the other books—and one or two students would come by, draw a happy or sad face, and talk about how they were feeling themselves. Not Will. I know we would all like to think that as in a fairy tale, Will came up to the book one day, sat down, and drew beautiful pictures of his mother, identifying with the literature and spilling out his feelings. But he didn't—and he never did.

It would have been easy to consider this a failure. But it wasn't, it never is. A week later, I read and added to the table and to our library *Sad Book* by Michael Rosen (2005) and *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss (1998), two books also illustrating feelings through accessible depictions while expressing the emotional complexity of human experience. *My Happy Sad Mummy* stayed, for Will and anyone else who wanted it. Instead of pushing more and more books on the sadness theme, I switched it up and brought in books that were definitely not sad. I used cheerful, peaceful books, like *The Jar of Happiness* by Ailsa Burrows (2016), *The Popcorn Astronauts and Other Biteable Rhymes* by Deborah Ruddell (2015), *Knuffle Bunny* by Mo Willems (2004), and *Draw Me a Star* by Eric Carle (1998), to help the children unwind and spend some time escaping through a window to a world not their own.

Switching to pleasant books as a way to detract from the dark content of previous days, I thought about the versatility of literature. Not only could I use books to discuss difficult topics with my students, but I could use literature to lift moods and provide a haven. While escaping through the words in stories was wonderful, discussing them, spending time reading them together, and connecting in a shared, real experience generated a bonding that in itself was sound, valuable practice.

There is much discussion in the theoretical literature on bibliotherapy about whether its beneficial effects derive from the actual reading of the text itself or from the interaction, discussion, and sharing around the text that typically accompanies that reading. It seems likely the answer is both. (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2019)

About a month after we had moved on to other books, Will came up to me as I worked on a tall tower of green clay dough with other students. He stood next to me for a long time, observing us. Just the idea of him standing still for more than five minutes was a big deal. I wondered what it meant. He looked at my face intently and trying to avoid his stare, I smiled at the tower and my working hands. He put his hand gently on my arm, and when I looked at him, he smiled, with what could only be described as contentment, or relief. I glimpsed some of the blithe playfulness he had when I'd first met him. I was still very confused about him. I wasn't sure my questions would be answered. All I could hope for was his well-being, and there it was.

His behavior became significantly easier to redirect in the following months. He was making choices again, and he was no longer screaming when it was time to go home. Will was also more affectionate and sweeter with all of us in the teaching team than he had ever been. I like to think the books gave him some comfort—a sense of understanding, and that in this understanding, he could find a drop of peace. There is no way for me to know.

We have such little, finite time with our students and their families. And when it comes to helping them through heavy life circumstances, there is rarely a satisfying happy ending. Even so, the symbiotic relationship of teacher and student often leaves us with as much as we give.

I identified more with Will's mom than I cared to admit, except that my dark days or anxious moments were spent in the classroom focusing outside of me. And much like a lot of other social justice issues becoming increasingly mainstream in early childhood education, I am grateful that mental health, self-care, and being mindful of stress have become more conventional themes after their history of social stigma. My own experiences with anxiety have informed my capacity for emotional responsiveness and have honed my teaching style to one that is acutely aware and observant of children's emotional needs, and the impact their personal realities have on their academic lives.

Utilizing books to breach challenging topics has helped me personally as a teacher—I can discuss things that mean a great deal to me while disaffiliating myself from the intimacy of the moment, until I am ready to connect. It helps that you can talk about anything with a book, and children love them. They are essential tools for teaching and learning that color the process of delivering content to young children. Appropriate, quality literature goes far beyond stimulating children's literacy learning. Books help to convey messages of every kind, illustrating ideas in concrete, visual ways to help children make sense of their lives, of others' lives, and of the world. They establish meaningful foundations for literacy, critical thinking, social interactions, and emotional literacy. Reading for Will reminded me to be vulnerable—and to own it.

From the perspective of many in American society, childhood is considered a time of carefree innocence, of sunshine and rainbows. While we all wish this were so, the reality is very different. In a field that centers around young children, discussing the ugly trenches of real life is often forbidden. When children themselves are living embattled experiences—hunger, police brutality, crime—how do we expect them to believe the lies about what their lives should look like? We've hidden the truths about the battlefield of life, while they are active soldiers in the war. As a teacher who believes there must be a balance of maintaining childhood's whimsical spirit while being honest about the realities of life, literature is a saving grace. The hope is that from the depths of ugly circumstances good things can grow.

Literature helped Will and me confront our realities, while painting them in soft strokes of watercolor come alive with tears. Will was a small, brave child facing whipping winds on a cliff, trusting he'd fly by the power of his own strength, alongside the loving arms both books and we provided.

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## About the Author



**Carolina Soto Bonds** is a Bronx native, a writer, NYS certified teacher, and educational consultant in early childhood education. Bonds is a strong believer in developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive practice as well as honoring students' funds of knowledge as a cornerstone of effective teaching. Her personal experiences in teaching are published in over 30 articles penned for Bank Street's graduate admissions blog between 2016 and 2018. Bonds carries a ubiquitous awareness and appreciation of others' lenses, perspectives, and cultures—she celebrates her own by utilizing her Dominicaness and roots in education as catalysts for change. She shares her love of travel, food, and all things Caribbean/Afro-Latin with anyone who will listen. Bonds resides in New York City where she continues to work for the communities that saw her grow up.



# Angry Like Me

Catherine-Laura Dunnington and Shoshana Magnet

*A young preschool student, his hands sticky from a classroom breakfast of whole wheat pancakes and blueberries, was sitting on my lap, wiggling from right to left on my thighbone. Kaleb<sup>1</sup> had been absent the day before during our circle time reading of Oliver Jeffers' *The Heart and the Bottle* (2010). I, Catherine, was about to read it to him.<sup>2</sup>*

This reading was part of a year-long project that saw us collaborating with six expert preschool teachers and over 60 preschool students across three different senior-level preschool classrooms. We had been working on a project focused on hard, painful feelings of grief and trauma and the necessity of remaining open in order to experience the myriad emotions life offers us. This had been a huge undertaking that often proved painful for teachers and students alike.

In many ways, the project began before Shoshana and I met. Having spent a decade teaching preschool, I was returning to doctoral studies in order to reflect on questions of early childhood literacy in my own research. In my teaching practice, I had often come up against colleagues who persisted in reading “tired” picture books, books we might label easy, that never seemed to pose many “problems”—books that did not deal with difficult topics or tackle hard-to-discuss social issues.

Shoshana had spent the past decade teaching undergraduate courses on social justice, feminism, and prison abolition. She was now a mother to a young child who was eager to be read to. As she read picture books to her son, she began to wonder about both the messages and the gaps in these texts. We met by chance in a sewing studio and, after briefly discussing our mutual love of artful picture books, settled into a years-long collaborative research relationship.

This particular project was dreamed up during a coffee shop meeting between Shoshana and me. We worried that our academic ideas and analyses of picture book texts were not reaching our desired audiences: teachers and preschool students (Magnet & Tremblay-Dion,<sup>3</sup> 2018, 2019). We decided to approach three preschool centers, each affiliated with a local college of early childhood education, in a mid-sized Canadian city.

We were particularly interested in representations of grief and trauma in picture books. We reviewed several books that we enjoyed but settled on *The Heart and the Bottle* (Jeffers, 2010). This story centers on a young girl who, upon losing her caregiver figure, places her heart in a glass bottle to protect it. As this book included the problematic notion of “shutting down,” (symbolized by placing her heart in a bottle), a concept which was hard to find represented in picture books, the project we designed featured only this text.

When all three preschool classrooms responded positively to our pitch to work together, we started designing the three-part experience that would accompany the introduction of this text to the children. During our first experience we invited teachers to read *The Heart and the Bottle* to the children during their regularly scheduled circle time. We provided an open-ended discussion guide to help teachers have a conversation with their students about the book and the students’ responses to it. The second experience

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1 All names have been changed to protect student confidentiality.  
2 Italics signify the shift to telling the story of our reading with Kaleb.  
3 Catherine-Laura Dunnington (formerly Tremblay-Dion).

featured a movement prompt when children were tasked with embodying some of the hard feelings the book highlights. Finally, our third experience tasked children with a collage-making art center where they could illustrate their own interpretations of Jeffers' book.

It is important to note that at the time of our study, "experience" was a term widely used within the preschool centers we visited. This project reflects the language norms of each center in deference to the expertise of the educators we collaborated with. Now, however, most centers use the term "provocation" (instead of the term "experience") to signal that an invitation to engage with materials, thoughts, stories, and movements has been made to the children without anticipating any particular response (Felderman, Kissel, & Nash, 2015). While our project uses the word "experience," the educators we collaborated with understood this term as synonymous with the now widely used term "provocation."

At one of the preschools a young boy named Kaleb and his response to the book particularly caught our attention. Kaleb had expressed interest after having "missed out" the day before.

***I took Kaleb into my lap and began reading. Despite his initial interest in the book he was now giggling, touching my cheek and wiggling back and forth (which was starting to hurt). It was difficult to tell if the story mattered, and it was getting hot.***

All the teachers we worked with provided us with minimal background information about their students. We knew their names, ages, and any incidental information that may have been shared, with or without intention. In the case of Kaleb, we knew that his absence the day before was "not uncommon" and that his appearance at school on this particular day, still wearing his pajamas, was not surprising. We were also aware that a few of his siblings had attended the center before him. This information was gathered anecdotally and without solicitation on our part.

The sparse knowledge of the students was something we had requested in order to observe interactions between teachers/students, students/students, and ourselves/students with the least amount of preconceived bias. While we may have inferred that perhaps Kaleb had a challenging home structure that led to his absences and the non-committal remarks made regarding his wearing of pajamas, there was no information to corroborate this. Indeed, any harried parent of a young child can empathize with allowing a strongly opinionated pajama-clad preschooler to make her way out the door in the morning.

### **Making Connections**

***Kaleb and I had just reached the double-page spread in Jeffers' text where the main character, a nameless little girl, faces an empty chair in a darkening room. His attention remained seemingly focused on his own body movements and exploration of my cheek.***



*The Heart and the Bottle*, pp. 13-14, Oliver Jeffers© 2010

It is on this double-paged spread that the reader is tasked with imagining the little girl's loss, embodied by the darkening empty chair, once filled and bathed in light. Jeffers does not extrapolate on the precise loss she is facing; thus, we are free to envision our own losses, or to picture her nameless pain alongside her.

Scholar Jessica Whitelaw (2017) offers insight into this type of book, and these particular pages, in her article "Beyond the Bedtime Story: In Search of Epistemic Possibilities and the Innovative Potential of Disquieting Picturebooks." She argues that children's picture books, so often used to quiet the body and the mind at bedtime, are actually uniquely able to present challenging material. The picture book can disrupt the status quo and offer an invitation to both critical thought and discomfort. A book like *The Heart and the Bottle* calls children to embrace hard, "disquieting" emotions. It thus offers Whitelaw's (2017) five epistemic invitations of a disquieting text: it embraces ambiguity, is open to hurt, pauses for interruptions, witnesses resistance, and hears silence (p. 33). With its spare text, abstract-yet-familiar illustrations, and unnamed loss, *The Heart and the Bottle* is an exemplar of a "disquieting picture book."

Trauma, pain, death, and loss are experienced across difference. While pain, loss, and death are perhaps more self-evident terms, it is useful to pause on the word trauma. We align ourselves with Dutro's (2013) claim that "trauma represents an instance of what is beyond knowing" (p. 302). Trauma, for us, is a word used to encapsulate the incomprehensible experience that disrupts life and creates a disjoint between life *before* a traumatic event and life *after* it. While there are many disparate definitions and implications of the word "trauma," defining it within the "incomprehensible" or hard-to-name is a useful concept for us as researchers who work with young children. Often young children express themselves narratively in ways that are not linearly or easily understood by adult listeners (Hudson, Gebelt, Haviland, & Bentivegna, 1992). As trauma scholar Cathy Caruth has noted, underscoring the incomprehensible nature of trauma does not mean there is nothing describable about a traumatic experience. Rather, we grasp and name elements of trauma to ourselves, and at times others, while acknowledging that elements of trauma cannot be named or readily understood (Caruth, 1996). For the purposes of our work we use trauma to describe a painful life experience that ruptures what comes before and after it, and remains incomprehensible (Dutro, 2013; Berger, 1997).

Trauma, pain, death, and loss are also disproportionately present for those caught in a web of complex intersecting health and social concerns. From the ways that the prison industrial complex and mass incarceration have been used deliberately to imperil the health of people of color/queer people/people living in poverty (Maynard, 2017; Ritchie, 2017; Mogul, Ritchie, & Witlock, 2011; Gilmore, 2007), to the ways that health care is accessed unequally across lines of class, race, gender, and sexuality causing unnecessary suffering and premature death (Gay, 2014; Roberts, 1997), to the ways that access to secure forms of housing and employment remain structured by what bell hooks calls "white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy" and settler colonialism (Abu-Zahra & Kay, 2012; Yee, 2011; hooks & Jhally, 1997), we cannot think about grief and loss without thinking about intersectional inequalities.

*By now I was feeling desperate; perhaps reading this book was futile and I had better stop. Kaleb's classroom was the last one we visited and perhaps the exhaustion of a long-lasting research endeavor was grating on me as I prepared to give up on this particular moment, child, and read-aloud. In an admittedly lame-hearted effort to recapture Kaleb's interest in the story I traced the empty chair with my finger and whispered to myself, "I wonder what she is feeling." I didn't expect a response.*

*Then Kaleb, without pause, said certainly, "She's angry just like me! She wants her daddy." I was speechless.*

## Finding a Mirror

Kaleb was drawing himself and the little girl together, meshing her fictional pain with his own real-life expression of anger. He was living through what author Linda Sue Park (2015) says books offer: “[A]s life is unfair...[they are] a way to glimpse how others face this unfairness” (2:22). Parents, perhaps Kaleb’s daddy included, disappear because of death, illness, choice, and state policies that mandate mass incarceration. It is never fair when a child loses a parent and children lose parents directly as a result of the ways that White supremacy, sexism, ableism, and classism intersect in order to make some parents more vulnerable to disappearing or being disappeared than others. Drawing connections between himself and the little girl allowed Kaleb to see himself in the loss of “her daddy,” an unfair experience that was “just like” his own.

*Unsure how to proceed I remained silent. I waited for Kaleb to clue me in to what he needed. He looked up at me and smiled, played once more with my hair. I decided to echo his words back to him, saying, “She’s angry just like you. She misses her father.” He smiled broader and said simply, “Yeah,” and turned the page for me.*

In the context of this disquieting text, Kaleb had found either a mirror of his own experience, or a window into it. Here was the potential for using disquieting texts in the classroom, as our project had hoped to do. We were witness to Kaleb finding a book-mirror. It was one of those books read in childhood that “becomes a means of self-affirmation” (Bishop, 1990, xi).

Certainly, our labeling of this “mirror moment” for Kaleb is an assumption. It may be that Kaleb saw a path into his experience. It may be that this book gave him a way to continue to discuss or express his emotions, but with someone else at some other time. We cannot know for sure. As Dutro (2013) points out, inviting disquieting picture book texts into the classroom recognize[s] and embrace[s] the disorientation of living in the not quite known, entering a space we cannot quite fathom, but wherein lies potential for vital connection with ourselves and others (p. 304).

Two days later his teachers did not have any further insight into Kaleb’s exclamation, and due to the limitations of our project it was not possible to make more inquiries. While we may not be able to offer further insight into this momentary connection between Kaleb and our picture book, we can acknowledge the experience of listening to a young child feeling anger or expressing past anger.

## Trouble Ahead

As in life, this was a project filled with challenges, foreseen and not. We did not anticipate the difficulty posed by the metaphorical concept of “heart” as a repository of emotions. It often seemed poorly suited to the concrete world of early childhood. The children who often envisioned a *literal* heart, thus, were stymied by the girl’s literal heart in a bottle. Similarly, they were not always able to wonder about her caretaker’s loss and what it might mean to her metaphorically. Although not necessarily problematic, in future work we are considering adding explicit educator statements such as “Maybe he died, or maybe he had to go away. Maybe he left on purpose” (Dunnington & Magnet, 2020).

We did anticipate that using such a painful text might challenge teachers to slow down and accept their own feelings in relation to both the book and the children’s responses. If “trauma represents an instance of what is beyond knowing even as traumatic stories demand witness,” this truth echoes within the text for both the teacher and the student who listens and experiences the story (Dutro, 2013, p. 302). This experience-

magnification emphasizes “what it means to carry, to live, [and] to invite traumatic stories into the space of a literacy classroom” (Dutro, 2013, p. 302). For a child such as Kaleb, who reflected his own trauma story eloquently in relation to the central character’s trauma, the teacher is tasked not only with witnessing his experience, but inviting this type of work into her classroom.

### **Windows for Teachers**

Throughout our entire project, we observed that it was a struggle for teachers to read *The Heart and the Bottle*. Teachers often became emotional while they were reading it. They teared up, or choked up, or were unable to continue reading, causing them discomfort. They expressed their difficulties to us. One teacher told us she had to practice reading the book to be “ready not to cry” in front of the preschoolers. Another teacher said simply, “It’s such a *sad* book.”

Every teacher we worked with bravely read this book to the children anyway. Their commitment to their preschoolers and the project was admirable. Yet we were left wondering how to deal with this disjuncture between the pedagogical literature that cites how important this type of work is and the lived experience of how painful it is to do it. How many teachers are prepared to carry it out?

How can we best support teachers to do this work? A preschool teacher is tasked, every single day, with letting go of their own needs in favor of the immediacy of the children’s needs. Is this also the case with the disquieting text? No preschool teacher who read *The Heart and the Bottle* aloud acknowledged her own emotions in front of the children. But this type of disclosure, though possibly difficult, might also be humanizing.

Perhaps a future pedagogy of disquieting texts should leave room for the reader to appropriately acknowledge how the book makes *them* feel. Bishop reminds us that “When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror” (1990, xi). While a teacher using a disquieting text might be trying to show children a window, she may encounter a mirror reflecting herself and her pain. A read-aloud is both read and heard: there is someone on both sides.

### **Conclusion**

We have given away copies of Jeffers’ *The Heart and the Bottle* like Halloween candy to children and teachers. “Have a copy,” we say, “we think it might help.” We see this important picture book as one that invites teachers to witness pain within their classrooms. Yet we also view this text, and the work of witnessing, within the larger context of social justice education. In *Critiquing Social Justice Picture Books*, Grace Enriquez (2014) argues that we need to evaluate picture books not just on whether they deal with social justice issues (White supremacy, homelessness, or poverty) but on whether they foreground materials that “provoke pause and deeper examination of the accepted and unquestioned perspective, values, and practices around us” (27). Enriquez’s “pause” is similar to what Whitelaw (2017) envisions in books that allow the reader to hear silences.

Children’s books can provoke a critical evaluation of our world, the challenges, and the inherent possibilities for social transformation, all while keeping hope alive and central to narrative, in a way that does not aim to “expedite” a solution to complex social problems (Enriquez, 2014). As Jeffers’ text closes, the little girl has replaced her heart and reopened herself to the complexities of the emotions fundamental to living. This comes after many pages of having her heart-in-the-bottle, and freezing herself from pain. Inviting this book,

and a response such as Kaleb's, into a classroom space is risky, purposeful work. It foregrounds silence and "critical witnessing."

The imperative we put forth in this project is not one that privileges action, activity, or tangible intervention. Simply put, we are calling the reading of a disquieting text a radical act and the subsequent call to sit with the discomfort such a text might invoke revolutionary (Dutro, 2009). If the transformative and courageous behavior of protesters risking death to denounce police and state violence to communities of color in the current moment of 2020 teaches us anything, it is the stakes of asking people to sit with their feelings of discomfort in the face of brutalizing systems of power and oppression.

State power and police will literally silence protesters rather than be confronted with the pain that White supremacy causes. We are offering the field of early childhood education no tidy solution; instead, we call on teachers to join us in reading these types of books and sitting with the aftermath, whatever it may be. Sometimes the children do not respond, but they may respond someday. With this project, we are hoping to collectively build a world in which children become adults who know how to sit with feelings of discomfort, a life- and world-changing skill. Sometimes a child's response is painful and uncomfortable, but we are called to act as critical witnesses anyway (Dutro, 2009). Sometimes our own response to the picture book is raw and painful, but we might offer the children a model of someone reading and sitting with their own disquieting emotions.

This is work we need.

This is work that hurts.

This is Kaleb reminding us, "She's angry *just like me*."

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## About the Authors



**Catherine-Laura Dunnington** (formerly Tremblay-Dion) is a doctoral candidate at the University of Ottawa in the Faculty of Education. Her MEd was obtained at the University of Montana where she subsequently taught preschool for several years. Her work focuses on literacy, early childhood education, and arts-based learning. She has been published in the *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, *Bookbird: An International Journal of Children's Literature*, *Education Review*, and *Root & Star Magazine*.



**Shoshana Magnet** is an associate professor at the Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies at the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Her books include the monograph *When Biometrics Fail: Race, Gender and the Technology of Identity* (Duke University Press, 2011), and the edited collections *The New Media Surveillance* (co-edited with Kelly Gates, Routledge 2010) and *Feminist Surveillance Studies* (co-edited with Rachel Dubrofsky, Duke University Press 2015). She has published in journals including *New Media and Society*, *Body & Society*, *Feminist Media Studies*, and *Women's Studies Quarterly*.



# Taking a Journey to the Land of All: Using Children’s Literature to Explore Gender Identity and Expression with Young Children

*Kerry Elson and Kindel Turner Nash*

As a powerful form of media, children’s literature can help young people develop deeper and more nuanced understandings about gender, gender identity, and gender expression (Crisp, Gardner, & Almeida, 2017; Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Tsao, 2008). Gender identity is a person’s internal understanding of their gender, or “the roles, behaviours, activities, attributes and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for girls and boys, and women and men . . . different from . . . binary categories of biological sex” (World Health Organization, n.d.). Gender expression denotes the ways in which we outwardly communicate our gender (Crisp, 2020; GLAAD Media Reference Guide, n.d.). Schema and stereotypes about gender identity and expression develop between the ages of three and five (American Psychological Association, 2015).

This article shares how Kerry Elson used children’s literature to explore gender identity with young children. Kerry is in her eleventh year of teaching and has been teaching in New York public schools for five years. She identifies as White, cisgender, and nondisabled. The population of the school where Kerry teaches kindergarten and first grade, Central Park East II in East Harlem, New York, is richly diverse in language, ethnicity, and the lived experiences of the community. Eighty-eight percent are students of color—about 47 percent Latinx, 31 percent Black, 10 percent interracial, Asian, and American Indian.

Kindel Turner Nash is an associate professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Kindel identifies as White, cisgender, and connected to the Black community by marriage. Kindel and Kerry met four years ago in October 2016, when Kindel visited Kerry’s classroom as part of a national study of the literacy practices of high-performing teachers in urban early childhood classrooms. Since that initial visit, Kindel and Kerry have been thinking and writing together about teaching for justice (e.g., Nash, Elson, & Panther, 2019; Nash, Arce-Boardman, Dorhn-Melendez, & Elson, in press). As Kerry thinks about and implements literacy curricula, she shares ideas and reflections with Kindel, who, in turn, shares additional resources and ideas.

As White, cisgender women, we mirror the majority of U.S. teachers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Despite attempts to recognize and unlearn our biases, we acknowledge that our understandings about gender identity in general and the ideas shared here may still reflect lack of awareness. We do not claim authority on the subject of using children’s literature to explore gender with young children. This is one reason why children’s books that accurately reflect children’s lives and the world are crucial in our work—the books we share can become the teachers we cannot be.

In this article, we briefly review the professional literature on children’s books about gender identity and expression. Kerry describes a curriculum she implemented with first-grade students that focused on gender identity and expression, primarily using children’s literature to invite thinking and discussion. She reflects on what she learned about herself, her students, and the value of using children’s literature to further children’s ideas about gender identity and expression.

## Children's Literature about Gender Identity and Expression

Children's literature can be a powerful mode of value transmission and can shape children's understanding about gender expression and gender identity (Crawley, 2017; Crisp, Gardner & Almeida, 2017; Naidoo, 2017; Tsao, 2008). Children's books create models that scaffold children's understanding about themselves and the world (Bishop, 1990; Crawley, 2017). Over the last few years, there has been an increase in the number of children's and young adult books published about LGBTQ-identified people, gender identity, and expression (Cart & Jenkins, 2015; Naidoo, 2017). This has resulted in an increase in LGBTQ-inclusive resources and publishers in annual lists of recommended picture books and in curriculum resources for teachers of young children (see Table 1).

[Gender and Family Project](#)

[Gender Justice in Early Childhood](#)

[GenderSpectrum](#)

[Welcoming Rainbow Families in the Classroom: Suggestions and Recommendations for Including LGBTQ Children's Books in the Curricula](#)

[Sex? Sexual Orientation? Gender Identity? Gender Expression?](#)

[Rainbow Booklist](#)

[Stonewall Book Awards](#)

[Early Childhood: Learning about Gender Identity](#)

[Blood Orange Press](#)

[Reflection Press: Home](#)

Table 1. Selected LGBTQ-inclusive Resources, Booklists, and Publishers

Yet there is still a paucity of children's literature featuring LGBTQ-inclusive characters (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). Children's literature has historically reinforced gender stereotypes (Tsao, 2008). This is seen in an underrepresentation of female characters in children's books generally (Tsao, 2008) and in non-fiction books specifically (Crisp, 2015). Researchers point to the importance of diverse depictions of non-gendered characters and LGBTQ-inclusive people in terms of race, ethnicity, language, social class, religion, disability, ways of being, and theme (Crawley, 2017; Crisp & Hiller, 2011).

Teachers need to thoughtfully plan the way they create curriculum and share LGBTQ-inclusive children's literature so that they do not isolate LGBTQ students (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). Selecting books that are authentic in that they are authored/illustrated by members of the communities depicted is critical (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Boutte, 2002). Finally, when sharing LGBTQ-inclusive literature, teachers must take care not to choose only those books that conflate gender expression (e.g., clothing choice or hairstyle) with gender identity (Abate, 2008; Flanagan, 2013).

In planning the gender identity curriculum, Kerry anticipated children would engage in discussions and meet characters whose gender identity and expression might reflect themselves or the people they love.

She hoped the curriculum would offer depictions of gender identity or expression that differed from the children's expectations, leading them to talk about their responses, comfort, or discomfort and, ultimately, not just accept but identify with these characters. Kerry hoped children might extend this acceptance, appreciation, and empathy to people they knew, and to themselves. In the next section, Kerry describes how this curriculum unfolded.

### **Taking a Journey to the Land of All**

One afternoon in early March 2019, I was observing some of my first graders playing in our classroom's block area. The students had built a sprawling castle and were playing in it with small characters they had drawn on paper and taped to blocks. One student, Thando (all children's names are pseudonyms), had drawn a queen character and was speaking in a high voice as he bounced her around the castle. I overheard another child in the block area, Gloria, say to Thando, "Why do you always pretend to be a girl?" She tilted her head to the side and smiled as she asked, her voice a kind of sing-song. She sounded as though she were teasing him a bit, but also curious about his choice to pretend to be a girl. Thando paused and said something like, "Because I like to."

Though I generally teach the same group of students for two years (kindergarten and first grade), sometimes new students join us in year two for first grade. Thando was one such student; he had recently moved to the neighborhood. Kind and imaginative, he was a sought-after playmate and students were fascinated by his stories. For example, at writing time, Thando often wrote stories about a teenage girl named TJ whose mother was the planet Neptune.

Some children seemed puzzled by Thando, I think because his clothing and play preferences and demeanor didn't match their idea of being a boy. Sometimes he would stretch out the neck of his t-shirt, pulling it down like an off-the-shoulder top. Once, when he was wearing his shirt this way, a boy turned to him and said, "Ew!" Thando quickly adjusted his shirt so it covered his shoulders again.

Another time, Thando and a classmate, Alejandro, had returned to the classroom after working with a literacy specialist. The literacy specialist told me that Alejandro said, "Thando's a girl," during their session. It was clear that children were teasing Thando about how he expressed his gender identity, and I knew I needed to address it.

At first, I tried addressing the issue with individual students. After Gloria asked Thando why he pretended to be a girl, we had a conversation about the interaction. I tried to emphasize that it was okay for a boy to pretend to be a girl. However, she didn't seem convinced and as we spoke, her voice was quiet and she looked down; she seemed unsettled. I realized that individual conversations in response to harmful, teasing comments would not be enough to change how students interacted with Thando. I needed to have conversations with all of my students about gender and gender identity to create a more inclusive community.

I had been unsure about talking about gender with children in the past. I worried that we would end up talking about private body parts and that children would feel uncomfortable or silly. This is a common fear among educators (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). I worried that if children did mention penises, vaginas, and other parts in these discussions, parents would be upset. I also thought parents might be upset if I talked about gender identity in a way that didn't match how they talked about gender at home.

I also worried that I would give the wrong information or fumble. I'm a cisgender woman who is still learning about gender. But I felt that I needed to talk about gender in an explicit way, even if I was worried about it, because I wanted Thando to feel welcome, safe, and supported in our classroom. While I initiated these discussions partly because I wanted to protect Thando, I didn't want him to feel self-conscious. So in planning the curriculum, I decided to focus on general ideas about gender, rather than interactions children had with Thando. Another goal was to shift children's thinking so that they might adjust how they interacted with one another.

Researchers have found that teachers need to be careful when studying gender in response to harmful comments about gender identity and expression; such a curriculum can make the children who have been teased feel more isolated (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). I was not aware of this research when I was planning the curriculum, but in thinking through possible activities, I followed what I had learned about using children's literature in curriculum focused on students' identities in general (Bishop, 1990). I don't want anyone with a particular identity to feel that I am asking them to be an example for their classmates or to teach their classmates about this aspect of their identity. Instead, I want to talk about general ideas and invite students to share personal experiences only if they wish.

I planned morning meeting discussions we could have and books we could read. I figured I would adjust the plans based on the children's comments and questions. I wanted to start by asking children, "What is a girl?" and "What is a boy?" to uncover what they thought those words meant. I had attended a workshop on talking about identity with young children earlier in the year (S. Park, Personal Communication, October 11, 2018). In the workshop, teachers shared a gender curriculum they did with kindergarteners and said they started by asking students to define "boy" and "girl." As the curriculum continued, students realized that many things they felt were unique to girls or boys actually applied to both girls and boys. I hoped my students might come to similar conclusions.

I researched books that I could read aloud to help children think about gender, as well. Some of these books were explicitly about gender, while others featured characters with diverse gender identities and expressions (Table 2). I chose these stories in part because they feature bilingual characters who are Black and Latinx; I thought my students, many of whom are Black and Latinx and bilingual, might relate to these aspects of the characters. I mostly chose books that were written by people who are members of the community about which they write; such books would possibly present more accurate, authentic representations (Boutte, 2002). In addition, I chose books that featured characters that did not necessarily fit into one gender category. It seemed as though my students thought of gender as binary and became unsettled when a classmate's clothing or behavior did not match what they felt was appropriate. I hoped that meeting these characters could help students broaden their ideas of how boys and girls could be.

*They, She, He, Me: Free to Be!* by Maya Gonzalez and Matthew SG

*One of a Kind Like Me/Único como yo* by Laurin Mayeno

*They Call Me Mix/Me Lllaman Maestre* by Lourdes Rivas

*Neither* by Airlie Anderson

Table 2. Children's Literature about Gender Identity and Expression

In the next section, I discuss how I read these books with children and the conversations that unfolded during the read-alouds and morning meetings.

## The Land of All: Meeting the Characters

One morning in late March 2019, I was reading aloud *They, She, He, Me: Free to Be!* by Maya Christina Gonzalez and Matthew SG (2017). My students and I were sitting in our classroom meeting area, where we usually have lessons and read-alouds. The book presents images of people with different styles and lengths of hair and different styles of clothes. Under each person is a pronoun: me, he, she, they, tree, and ze. The images do not adhere to stereotypical images of boys and girls. For instance, on the pages featuring “he,” the individuals depicted have long hair, short hair, dresses, and pants.

When I read this book aloud, at first my students seemed at ease; they were sitting comfortably on our rug, looking at the pictures and listening as they would when I read any other story. As I continued to read, however, a few children squinted and tilted their heads to the side. I paused and asked, “What do you notice?” One child, Giacomo, said something like, “There’s a ‘he’ but he doesn’t look like a boy.” When I asked why, Giacomo said, “I don’t know.” Maybe he was unsure how to articulate his thinking or felt unsure about the picture. At the end of the book, the authors provide information for children about pronouns. For example, they explain,

Pronouns can be a way to share how you feel on the inside. Because this inside part is the most important part of you, it cannot be about outside ideas of how people think she or he is “supposed” to act. It has to be how you feel. (Gonzalez & SG, 2017, p. 27)

I read this information about pronouns to the class and then set the book aside because it was time for recess. I knew we needed more time with the book, but I told children it would be in our classroom library, in a basket of books about families, where I thought it might fit best for the time being. I said they could look at the book when they read classroom library books together on the rug, an activity that happened twice a day.

I regret that I did not read this book with children again. One reason was that children didn’t seem as engaged in it as I had hoped. However, the book’s text is simple and details are in the illustrations; children might have been more engaged if they had seen the illustrations better. Children needed to see the pictures up close and think about the pronouns associated with each character.

I did not have a working document camera and Smartboard at the time, but I do now; next time, I imagine showing the book under the document camera to help children see the pictures better. The first time we read it, maybe we could look only at the pictures; the second time, we could read the text, as well. In a guide for grown-ups at the back of the book, the authors say reading the book this way can help “kids feel free to relate and associate with who they want without judgment or expectations” (Gonzalez & SG, 2017, p. 36). We may need to read the book a few times to think carefully about its content.

I also may not have revisited the book because I was uncertain about how to lead discussions around it. I didn’t encourage the children to share ideas as much as I could have. For instance, after Giacomo made his comment about the character not looking like a boy, I could have asked other children, “Do you think the pronouns match people in the illustrations? Why or why not?” Asking this type of question would have allowed them to hear different perspectives on how people of specific gender identities can look. Children who thought boys needed to wear pants and have short hair, for instance, might begin to shift their thinking if they hear classmates’ varied answers to that question.

When I read aloud other stories, I pushed past my discomfort and encouraged children to share their responses. I tried to allow for different perspectives, but also to steer children toward accepting varied forms

of gender expression. I worked to strike this balance when we read aloud Laurin Mayeno's *One of a Kind, Like Me/Único como yo*, a book about a boy who wants to wear a princess dress to his school's Halloween parade.

After I finished reading the story, children shared ideas about whether a boy can wear a dress and pretend to be a princess. One child said, "It's okay for boys to wear dresses. Boys can wear whatever they want. I remember in pre-K, William wore a dress to school." William, who was now her first-grade classmate, became a bit flushed, laughed, and said, "Yes, I did." Another child quietly said to himself, "Boys can't wear dresses."

When I heard this comment, I said something like, "People's families have different ideas about how boys and girls can look. Children and their families get to decide which clothes are just right for them." I also said it's important to be kind and that if you don't agree with how someone is dressed, you would need to keep that idea in your mind. However, I hoped that by continuing to introduce children to characters who express their gender in various ways, and by talking about gender as a class, my students would begin to broaden their ideas about how boys and girls can look and behave. I hoped that with time, they would begin to see a boy wearing a dress, for example, as totally fine.

Children were wide-eyed as I read aloud *They Call Me Mix/Me Llamen Maestre* by Lourdes Rivas, a non-binary kindergarten teacher in Oakland, California. It's about Rivas's life growing up and explores how they came to realize that they were non-binary rather than someone who identified as a "boy" or "girl." I read this story because I wanted children to begin to think about gender beyond the "boy" and "girl" categories.

I also wanted to read this story because it talked about how so much of our everyday experience is affected by gender norms. In one part of the book, Rivas describes how lost and sad they felt when they went to clothing stores as a child and saw that clothes were divided into "boy" and "girl" sections. They also describe how toy stores often have separate sections for "boy toys" and "girl toys." This aspect of the book was relatable to my students because they had been to toy and clothing stores that were divided by gender. Many children appeared sad or concerned when we got to this part of the book; they seemed to understand how this character must have felt when they were little.

*They Call Me Mix* was popular with my students. After I put it in our classroom library, many children wanted to read it with classmates on the rug. Thando often chose to read this book with one of his best friends, Nyla. Often when reading time started, Thando and Nyla sat together and put this book between them, turning the pages and smiling as they looked at the pictures. Children in my class choose a classroom library book to take home each night for a parent to read to them. Several children chose to borrow this book. Among the children who borrowed it were Gloria and Giacomo, who initially seemed confused by non-stereotypical gender expressions. I thought perhaps they wanted to make sense of the content and think about it more.

I think children were interested in this book partly because it introduced them to a new idea for them: gender can be broad and you don't have to only be a "boy" or "girl"— you can identify as something else that feels right for you. The book may also have been compelling because it was written in the first person; maybe children felt connected to the story because the author spoke directly to them and asked them questions. For example, when Rivas (2018) describes visiting a toy store when they were little, they ask readers, "Have you ever noticed how almost everything is divided into Boys and Girls?" (p. 12). As a kindergarten teacher, Rivas also had experience communicating with young children and could write about complex ideas in ways that young children could understand. For example, in writing about how they came to realize they were non-binary, they write,

As a kid, I never felt like just a girl. I never felt right knowing everyone was deciding and agreeing that I was a girl. I also didn't feel like just a boy. I knew in my heart that I could never choose one or the other. (Rivas, 2018, pp. 8-9)

When students borrowed this book for a night, I worried about receiving concerned emails from their parents the next day. Perhaps parents would say they didn't think their child was ready to think about what it means to be non-binary. But I didn't get those emails. I only got one positive note from Giacomo's mom after her child borrowed the book, thanking me for talking about gender with children.

I tried to continue our discussions about the gender binary by reading Airlie Anderson's *Neither*, which is about an animal who lives in the Land of This and That, a fantasy world where only two types of animals exist. This animal is a combination of both animals and doesn't feel that they belong. The animal ends up discovering the Land of All, where all types of animals live together peacefully.

This book can be seen as an allegory for how the gender binary excludes people. I tried to help my students make that connection by asking, "What does this story remind you of in real life?" They said it reminded them of feeling sad when someone doesn't let them play a game for various reasons; it was a worthwhile discussion, but we didn't touch on the gender binary. If I had wanted students to relate the gender binary to the Land of This and That, maybe I needed to explicitly state the connection. At the time, however, I was reluctant to state the idea because it would be like telling children what to think. But perhaps I could have said something like, "Some people might say that This and That is like being a boy or a girl. What do you think about that idea?" The next time I read this book with children, I can try asking that type of question.

In addition to reading these stories, we talked about gender identity and expression at morning meetings. I wanted children to hear each other's ideas about boys and girls and, in hearing each other's perspectives, broaden their own ideas about gender. To start, over the course of a week, I asked, "What is a girl?" "What is a boy?" and "What is gender?" (Figure 1).

I chose a few ideas that children shared in those meetings to be topics for discussion at meetings in the following weeks. (In presenting a particular child's statement to the class, I didn't say which child had said it because I didn't want anyone to feel self-conscious. Instead, I said, "In a meeting, someone expressed this idea..."). For example, in response to my question, "What is a girl?" a child said, "You can name your own gender."

I wanted to talk about this idea more with students; I felt it was important for children to consider that people can name their own gender identity. So we revisited this child's statement in another meeting. I said to the class, "At another meeting, someone said, 'You can name your own gender.' What do you think about this idea?" At first, some children seemed confused, but then they talked about whether girls have to look a certain way. For example, one child said, "If you cut your hair, you can still be a girl." Now I realize I could have clarified the idea by giving an example of someone naming their gender, or asking, "What do you think that idea means?"

In another discussion, a child said, "Girls like dolls and boys like cars and girls can like cars and girls don't have to like dolls." I thought it was significant that the child didn't say that boys can like dolls, and I wondered how children would respond to that idea. So the next day, I restated that comment to the class and asked, "Can a boy also like dolls?" Children nodded. A few boys said they'd played with dolls. I hoped that talking about such an idea together, and hearing each other say it was okay, would help children feel more comfortable with the idea of a boy playing with a doll or doing something they might think only a girl would do.

Often when children talked about boys, girls, and gender, they came to realize that what they thought was true about boys and girls was not actually true. Some realizations were about hairstyles. For example, when we talked about girls, one child said they thought boys only had short hair. Then a classmate said she knew boys with long hair. She mentioned a boy in the class who used to have hair down to his chin. At another meeting, children talked about boys they knew who liked to paint their nails. These discussions were important extensions of the read-aloud experiences because children could continue sharing their ideas about gender and hear those of their classmates.

I was worried that these discussions would lead children to talk more about penises, vaginas, body parts, and sexuality, but those topics didn't arise. Only one child, Jamal, talked about body parts when I had asked, "What is a boy?" Earnestly, he said, "Boys have different parts than girls." As I wrote his idea on the whiteboard, I repeated it to the class, but no one talked about body parts after that. Instead, children talked about what boys wear and like to play with. Children's conversations around gender typically focus on these topics, rather than on sexuality and body parts (GenderSpectrum, 2019).

If children had talked more about body parts, I'd like to think I would have invited them to share what they knew and helped them take deep breaths if the conversation prompted giggles. I also imagine expressing a general idea about body parts and gender, such as, "Some people might think you have to be a certain way because you have certain private body parts. Is that true?" If, at that point, children had already begun to think more broadly about gender, I instead could say, "It sounds like people in our class are thinking that isn't true." I could then redirect the discussion to gender identity and expression.

Over the course of the curriculum, which lasted about six weeks, most children shared ideas and seemed engaged overall. Thando often seemed to be listening and thinking about what other people were saying, the way he did during all of our morning meetings and read-alouds. Sometimes he shared a thoughtful idea during a meeting, but often he spent more time listening. Other children were more vocal than he was in these meetings. He was more talkative in the block area, where he built castles with his friend John and continued to play with queen and princess characters he drew on paper and taped to blocks, hopping them around from one room in a castle to another.

### Lessons Learned

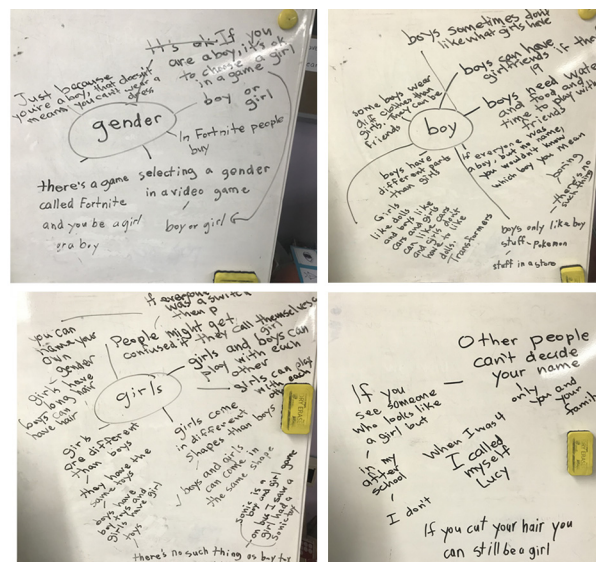


Figure 1. Morning Meeting Discussions about Gender Identity



I'd like to think the curriculum helped Thando and all children feel welcome and accepted in our group, but I don't know for sure. I do remember that once we started talking more about gender, I stopped hearing Gloria ask Thando why he always pretended to be a girl. When the literacy specialist walked with Alejandro and Thando back to the classroom, she only had brief updates about their work; I stopped hearing that Alejandro had called Thando a girl during their sessions.

At the very least, I hope that talking explicitly about gender and reading these picture books helped shift children's thinking a little. I hope the curriculum helped them feel more comfortable with people they might meet who express their gender identity in various ways. I also hope it helped children navigate their own anxieties about adhering to gender norms, and to feel freer to be themselves.

As I reflect on the curriculum, I think about what I could have done differently. For example, while my students and I did talk about various ways to be a girl, our conversations focused more on boys. I think this focus made sense because the students seemed more uncomfortable when boys in the class and male picture-book characters acted and dressed in ways that didn't match stereotypical ideas about boys. It can sometimes seem more socially acceptable for girls to be masculine; this actually elevates the perspective that masculinity is ideal and the norm (Abate, 2008; Flanagan, 2013). However, with future classes, I will have more discussions about the many different ways to be a girl.

I also wish I had talked more with students about how to respond if they hear someone saying unkind words about how someone expresses their gender. This kind of discussion could have allowed children to reflect on and use what they had learned about gender to advocate for justice in their community. We did have one such discussion in early May, after a student named Julian told me classmates teased him for having a My Little Pony backpack. The next day, with Julian's permission, I talked with children about the problem at our morning meeting and by the end, Julian seemed to feel better. I wrote about this discussion in a newsletter for families (Figure 2). When I study gender with students in the future, I aim to speak more generally about advocacy and make such conversations a bigger part of the curriculum.

**We continue to talk about gender. This week, we had a meeting to try solving a problem: a child in our class has a backpack with a My Little Pony character on it. He felt that some classmates were saying he shouldn't wear that backpack because he is a boy. When teachers shared this situation with the class, many said that it is fine for a boy to wear any kind of backpack. They mentioned class discussions we've had, saying, "Like when we were talking about gender, there's no such thing as boy toys and girl toys."**

**Children said that if you don't think a boy should have a My Little Pony backpack, you can think that idea, but you can keep that thought to yourself so the backpack-owner doesn't feel sad. We also talked about what you could say if you hear someone teasing someone else about their clothing or backpack: perhaps something like, "That's not nice. People can wear whatever kind of backpacks they like" and get help from a grown-up. Teachers were pleased to see children thinking more about gender and ways to help other people.**

*Figure 2. Weekly Newsletter Referencing Discussions about Gender*

Implementing this curriculum helped me feel more confident about discussing gender with students. I worried that children might talk about private body parts, but the conversations focused mostly on appearance, activities that different people like, and how people feel about themselves. Talking about these topics can help young children develop a sense of personal identity, which is important for them. These conversations are probably going to continue to be uncomfortable for me, but I need to have them so students can share ideas with me and one another. In hearing different perspectives from classmates and books, children's ideas about gender can begin to open up.

Basing the curriculum in stories was important. The books were like another teacher, both for me and for the children. I am not an expert on gender or on discussing gender with children. I am grateful that I could read aloud the words of authors and show artwork from illustrators who have much more knowledge of gender identity and expression than I do. I am grateful that these authors and illustrators have made books for teachers and families to read with children.

The books also served to be what I thought was a neutral starting point for discussion, one that didn't shame a young child for having a narrower concept of what it means to be a boy or a girl (Crisp & Hiller, 2011). To me, children with such viewpoints have only internalized messages about gender they've received from adults and popular culture, and perhaps children's literature (Tsao, 2008). Reading stories helped us start from a place of inquiring and thinking together, rather than with me simply stating, "Boys or girls can pretend to be whomever they want. Boys can be themselves. There are many ways to be a boy or girl." Those kinds of statements may not change a mindset in a lasting way.

I am fortunate to work in a school that supports talking about gender and other aspects of identity in the classroom. Even if I am not in such a setting in the future, I will try to share these stories and talk about gender with children because I must help children of all gender identities feel safe and welcome in my classroom. I want children to feel like they can be themselves.

As the school year came to an end, Thando continued to explore ideas about gender identity and expression through play. One day in late June, he had brought a floppy, stuffed bunny to school in his backpack. He showed it to me at dismissal. "When she wears this," Thando said, wrapping a swatch of fabric around the bunny, "she's a she." He removed the fabric. "And when she wears this, he's a he." I said it sounded like the bunny was thinking about gender. Thando smiled and said, "Yup!"

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## About the Authors



**Kerry Elson** teaches kindergarten and first grade in a loop at Central Park East 2, a public elementary and middle school in East Harlem, New York. She has contributed articles to *Rethinking Schools* and *Edutopia* and has presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention as well as Bank Street’s Teaching Kindergarten Conference. She is a graduate of Bank Street’s Early Childhood and Childhood General Education Program.



**Kindel Turner Nash** is an associate professor of early childhood education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Her scholarship and teaching focus on critical issues in early literacy learning—particularly how issues of race, language, and culture interface with children’s school experiences. Her most recent edited book, *Toward Culturally Sustaining Teaching*, was published by NCTE/Routledge.

# We Are All Learning about Climate Change: Teaching with Picture Books to Engage Teachers and Students

*Ysaaca D. Axelrod, Denise Ives, and Rachel Weaver*

People around the world are increasingly concerned about climate change and its effects on the world and on our lives. These concerns are not only being voiced by adults. Young people are also leading efforts to make significant shifts to change the course of our impact on the environment. Youth activists such as Greta Thunberg, environmental activist from Sweden; Isra Hirsi, co-founder the U.S. Youth Climate Strike; Autumn Peltier, water protector and advocate for clean drinking water in First Nations communities; Helena Gualinga, Indigenous environmental and human rights activist from Ecuador; and Mari Copeny, youth activist from Flint, Michigan, are among the many youth climate activists who work in their local contexts and on a global level to enact change.

Scholars in environmental education have focused on climate change for decades. However, young children were seldom included in their research. Most followed the advice of David Sobel (1996), who saw climate change as one of the “big, complex problems beyond the geographical and conceptual scope of young children” (p. 27). Sobel advocated for teaching young children a love of and care for nature and only gradually moving towards more complex environmental topics as children get older (Chawla, 2020). However, given the pervasiveness of climate change in the media, the increasing interest among communities to adapt and adjust to reduce their impact on the environment, and the efforts of high-profile activists such as Greta Thunberg, many children have become active participants in conversations and actions around climate change (Davis, 2010). For instance, some children have seen images or heard talk of wildfires raging in California and Australia and hurricanes devastating Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. Other children have experienced such events themselves, along with their families. Clearly, schools and teachers need to be prepared to work to support children’s understanding and questions around climate change and climate justice (Chawla, 2020).

Fear and worry over “age-appropriateness” of content are similar to the concerns adults express about having conversations with children around other challenging topics, such as race, gender diversity, immigration, and death (Doucet & Adair, 2013; Koplou, Dean, & Blachly, 2018; Mankiw & Strasser, 2013; Sexton-Read, 2004). Children are often seen as “too young” to understand these tough topics, teachers feel unprepared or uncertain about how to tackle the issues, and teachers are concerned about parents’ reactions to discussing these sensitive issues in the classroom. As a result, many topics that are considered controversial or sensitive are not addressed in elementary school classrooms.

We, like many others (e.g., Adair, 2014; Bloch, Canella, & Swadner, 2014) push against notions that children are too young to engage with complex topics, and instead view young children as capable and agentive. Climate change affects all of our lives and children should be invited to engage in conversations around a topic that impacts and will continue to impact their lives.

Beyond concerns about age appropriateness, the topic of climate change and climate justice is politically charged, and doesn’t sit neatly within a single subject or content area. Pizmony-Levy and Pallas (2019) argue

that teaching about climate change is a scientific matter as well as a social and ethical one, one that would benefit from a multi-pronged approach that adjusts and shifts curriculum to address the topic and builds collaboration with people engaged in sustainability work.

We, Ysaaca and Denise, teach pre-service teacher courses in literacy, social studies, and child development. We approach the topic of climate change and climate justice in an interdisciplinary way, attending to the ways that children understand and see the world, the contexts in which they live. Drawing on resources from scholars in environmental education and social justice education, and from organizations that focus on teaching about climate change and climate justice, we started to think about how to support future teachers to engage in curricula that teaches children about climate change. Our particular focus is on the use of children's literature to anchor these lessons and conversations.

Given our expertise in literacy and child development, we were familiar with the use of children's literature to address controversial and challenging conversations. We discuss with our pre-service teachers the myriad ways that children's literature can be "mirrors, windows, and doors" (Bishop, 1990), providing opportunities for children to see themselves and others and to engage deeply in discussions that are challenging and yet necessary for them to develop a sense of themselves in our complex world.

In this article, we, two teacher educators, are joined by Rachel, a pre-service teacher, to describe how we started the process of reimagining our work to include climate change and climate justice in our elementary teacher education program. We document the way that Rachel took up the topic of climate change and climate justice in her first-grade student teaching placement and designed a unit around a trade book that focuses on the words and work of Greta Thunberg.

The next section is written in two voices: of Denise, who teaches social studies and English language arts methods courses, and of Rachel, the pre-service elementary teacher.

### **Teaching the Climate Justice Learning Module (Denise)**

I teach the social studies methods class in a one-year, graduate level teacher education program. This course focuses on student-centered, inquiry-based methods for teaching the content of history and social studies for grades 1 to 6. It emphasizes critical pedagogy, multicultural children's literature, anti-bias education, and social justice perspectives. It is one of the first two classes taken by our elementary licensure students and is taught in the summer with five weeks of online and one week of face-to-face instruction. For each week of the online portion of the class, students complete a thematically organized learning module.

Weekly modules include activities such as exploring web-based resources, reading and viewing a variety of texts, and participating in online discussions. I ask students to read *Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades* (Cowhey, 2006), a book written by a local teacher, and to explore websites such as the [National Council for the Social Studies](#), [Teaching Tolerance](#), [Social Justice Books](#), and the [Zinn Education Project](#).

Students are asked to read diverse texts ranging from standards documents, curriculum units, and teaching guides to practitioner-based journal articles and children's books. I introduce students to state history and social science frameworks as well as to the [Social Justice Standards](#) developed by Teaching Tolerance. During the last week of the class, when we meet in person, students work in grade-level teaching teams to develop a "seed" for an inquiry-based unit that integrates social justice standards and social studies content

with one or more disciplines. A required component of the seed is a diverse set of texts, including various genres, reading levels, formats, and modes.

As I prepared to teach the course in summer 2019, I discovered that the Zinn Education Project (ZEP) had launched a new campaign called **Teach Climate Justice**. ZEP argued convincingly that “the climate crisis threatens our students’ lives, and yet, throughout the United States, schools have failed to put the climate at the center of the curriculum” (para. 1). The purpose of the ZEP campaign is “to address this gulf between the climate emergency and schools’ inadequate response” (para. 2).

I wondered if this was the right resource for my students. After all, this was a course on social studies methods, not a science class, and my students were learning to be teachers of elementary-aged students. Still, I eagerly opened and read the launch article entitled, **“Our House is on Fire—Time to Teach Climate Justice” (2019)**, by well-known social studies educator Bill Bigelow. The article begins with a description of a young climate activist named Greta Thunberg, who was skipping school each Friday in order to protest inaction on the climate crisis and imploring students around the world to join her. In his article, Bigelow argues that climate change is a social justice issue and invites all educators to commit to teaching climate justice.

That summer climate change was in the news and on my mind. June 2019 was the hottest month ever recorded, glaciers were melting rapidly in the Arctic, a record-breaking heat wave gripped Europe, and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) had just released an alarming report declaring a climate emergency. At the same time, millions of people all over the world, including my own two children, had joined 16-year-old activist Greta Thunberg in skipping school to protest inaction on climate change. Greta Thunberg’s efforts and influence were being recognized: she was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, named *Time’s* person of the year, and listed as one of Forbes 100 most powerful women.

I decided to take up Bigelow’s challenge and opted to replace a previous social studies module with a newly designed Teaching Climate Justice module. The new module focused on talking about books on climate change with children and specifically on teaching climate justice. Students explored the Rethinking Schools and Zinn Education Project websites, where they learned about the work of Howard Zinn and the idea of “a people’s pedagogy.” They also read articles demonstrating ways that teachers had taught or might teach about climate change and justice, including “The (Young) People’s Climate Conference: Teaching Global Warming to 3rd Graders” (Shafer, 2017), a Climate Mixer lesson plan (Bigelow & Swinehart, 2014), and an article titled, “8 Ways to Teach Climate Change in Almost Any Classroom” (Kamenetz, 2019). Students viewed three short videos: a TED talk by Greta Thunberg (2018), *The Story of Stuff* (Priggen & Fox, 2007), and *The Green New Deal, Explained* (Vox, 2019), and read the children’s books: *A River Ran Wild: An Environmental History* (Cherry, 2002), *The Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Amazon Rainforest* (Cherry, 2000), and *The Magic School Bus and the Climate Challenge* (Cole, 2010).

I was curious what my students would make of the Climate Justice module. I expected some students would be skeptical about the idea of teaching the topic to young children, viewing it as too scary or complex for elementary students. I imagined others might see climate change as too politically sensitive. As part of the module, students discussed the following: Where does climate change belong in the curriculum? In their responses, students overwhelmingly commented that they were surprised and disheartened to read in the “8 Ways” article that so few teachers were teaching climate change. They felt “with the current state of the world” the topic was very important, and for some, it was a personal passion. A few students admitted they were surprised by the big push for climate justice education, saying they thought it was frowned upon or

not allowed. Nonetheless, the consensus among my students was that climate change can and should be taught to young students, especially by integrating subject areas and centering on community engagement and activism.

The following semester I had the same students in my English Language Arts methods class. I asked them to develop a literature focus unit and was thrilled to learn that Rachel was already in the process of developing a unit for her practicum featuring a recently published book about Greta Thunberg, *Our House is on Fire: Greta Thunberg's Call to Save the Planet* (Winter, 2019). Rachel shared her unit plans and text set with me and together we talked through her unit activities. We discussed what background knowledge students might need, how to scaffold her young student's learning, and which texts would be used for which purposes. Conversations about the unit spilled across other course boundaries, too, as Ysaaca, in the child development class, prompted Rachel to tend to not just the scientific but also the emotional and developmental component of learning about a tough topic.

### **The Climate Change Unit (Rachel)**

In the fall I was assigned to a first-grade classroom. Every month my mentor teacher used books, videos, and other materials to introduce the children to a different important figure, with the goal of celebrating diversity and ensuring that students were seeing a leader who represented them. Looking over the roster I noticed a lack of young heroes, and inspired by my coursework where we learned about climate justice and youth advocates, I decided to teach about Greta Thunberg and climate change. I purchased *Our House is on Fire* (Winter, 2019) and decided to use it as a focal text. While previewing the book, I realized there were many elements (strong language, audience, use of metaphor) that I had to address and scaffold before reading the book aloud. As in any classroom, there was a wide range of academic levels, social skills, and socio-emotional skills across my first-grade students. The first week of the unit consisted of creating scaffolds to prepare students to understand the text, and given the developmental range within the classroom, I needed to focus on how to meet the diverse needs of students across different domains.

There was concern among my fellow pre-service classmates and students in my mentor teacher's graduate course on children's literature that *Our House is on Fire* (Winter, 2019) was a picture book written for adults. While I understood the concerns, I valued the book for telling Greta Thunberg's story in a way that encompassed both positive and negative realities: though Greta Thunberg is an influential activist, she also faced an internal struggle with the reality of climate change (an emotional component that is sometimes omitted in children's environmental/climate change literature). The book also quotes Greta Thunberg directly and reveals a truth that is often not shared with children: our planet is in crisis. For these reasons, I chose this book as the focal text for the unit. Having made this choice, it became clear that as I discussed the complex and at times devastating truth, I would need to help the children to identify and process their emotional responses.

Drawing on elements of backwards design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), I identified my main goal: to help children learn how people can come together to make a change. I wanted to use Greta Thunberg as an example of how to help and inspire others; Greta Thunberg would also serve as a means to teach students about climate change and the reasons why activists are passionate about reform. I created a two-week unit centering on Greta Thunberg, climate change, and social justice education.



Each lesson included children's books that addressed various aspects of climate change to provide students with scientific knowledge and understanding of climate change, as well as the role of humans in tackling climate change. After each read-aloud, conversations about both the content and students' emotional responses were encouraged. Students were provided with continuous opportunities to share their feelings and thoughts surrounding climate change, and the educators in the classroom were able to monitor children's emotional responses and processing. The culminating project of this unit was for students to decide on a collective effort that would have a positive impact.

Students began the unit with a scientific exploration of the Arctic and the effects of our warming global temperature. This activity was prefaced with two read-alouds: *Michael Recycle* (Bethel, 2008) and *A Planet Called Home: Eco-Pig's Animal Protection* (French, 2009). Both of these books allowed students to gain and build background knowledge about caring for the environment and our changing climate. This theme of generating background knowledge that introduces and elaborates scientific content was essential in this lesson plan; students gained shared experiences that they were able to reference and use as building blocks to engage in deep, critical conversations.

I was surprised by the amount of background knowledge about climate change that students themselves brought into the classroom. Each child had at least one experience or bit of information they were excited to contribute to the conversation. These ranged from experiences at climate protests to recycling in the classroom. Many students also had a sophisticated understanding of the stress that climate change causes our planet, with a handful of students noting that human activity is causing harm on a global level. There were several moments throughout the unit where I felt as though the information I was providing was not new, but rather an opportunity to discuss this information in the classroom. My role then focused more on clarifying information and misinformation and emotionally assisting students as they discussed and processed their feelings.

Students were given opportunities to engage independently with the topic of climate change via morning choice stations and exploratory stations during reading workshop. In morning choice, students had access to the literary text set (see References for the selected books on climate change included in the classroom library). During reading workshop, students were directed to fill out exploratory sheets that prompted them to look closely at their books and share what they were learning. These small invitations to build upon/create background knowledge and engage in unstructured conversation with peers promoted critical thinking and engagement throughout the unit. Small stations such as these were able to assist me in developing a multi-pronged approach to teaching climate change, as students were given opportunities to engage with the topic across their school day.

Another component of the unit involved collaborating with a parent who works on green building alternatives and has a background working with soil and soil policies. She led the students through several experiments and discussions about the impact of changes in soil in our lives. I then read the book *Not For Me Please, I Choose to Act Green* (Godsey, 2018), which highlights cause and effect about our interactions with the environment. After this, I read aloud the focal text, *Our House is on Fire* (Winter, 2019), introducing students to Greta Thunberg and her movement.

Students responded in a variety of ways to the read-aloud. Some walked away with a deep understanding that our world is threatened and we need to step up and hold the people in charge responsible; some took

away the message that one young girl created a large movement to help the earth; others took away a story in which the earth was on fire and a girl helped by not going to school. These takeaways were reflective of children's understanding of the text, their experiences, and prior knowledge. They support the idea that children are able to engage with complex ideas and texts.

After reading *Our House is on Fire*, I showed students a presentation that depicted children from around the world protesting global inaction on climate change. We discussed and analyzed some of the posters that children were holding—foreshadowing work to be done later in the unit. The students were engrossed in the discussion of the posters. Specifically, the class seemed to have an admiration for the slogan “There is no planet B.” During snack one day students talked about what the phrase meant to them. Many students used the phrase to decorate their own posters, as they came to realize that having only one planet places a responsibility on humans to ensure that the planet is well, because it is a collective home for all.

The next read-aloud was *My Wounded Island* (Pasquet, 2009/2017), which led to a conversation about the impact of climate change on human life. A note from my reflections on teaching that day:

This book has been the most thought-provoking one thus far and it prompted an admirable amount of critical thinking. I was blown away by the class's ability to piece together what the “creature” harming the environment was. When we were still assessing what this creature was, one student analyzed the illustration and made a profound connection. They said, “I think the creature is a jellyfish because jellyfish are dangerous to a lot of animals and we are also really dangerous to a lot of animals so maybe it's a mix of us [humans] and the jellyfish.”

Students were making connections between the fictional story and the lessons about climate change and the role of humans. Another remarkable comment came up when we were discussing how Greta Thunberg had addressed this monster—she demanded that fossil fuels must stay in the ground. Focusing on the page in the book where the creature is seen in the emissions (of what are presumably factory buildings) we were talking about how fossil fuels are what we use for energy. In response to that statement, one student noted that “without energy we won't be able to have lights or drive cars to go help people”—a brilliant observation. I complimented their scientific thinking and emphasized that this is a problem that many scientists are trying to solve. I then brought over several non-fiction books that explore energy derived from other sources. It was a great way to cement that very important realization/connection.

The unit concluded with students creating their own posters depicting what they had learned about climate change, what humans can do, and the consequential environmental impact. Finally, students marched around the school to educate others about climate change and the actions that can be taken to combat it.

Throughout this unit there was ample support not just from faculty and peers in my program, but from families. Besides involving a parent in presenting information to the class, there were several other ways in which families were engaged and responded to the curriculum. At the beginning of the unit, families were sent an email that discussed the goals and purpose of the lessons being taught, along with a few resources suggesting how to continue conversations at home. Families were also engaged at the end of the unit via a questionnaire for both caregivers and students. Caregivers were able to express their feelings and thoughts about climate change, report what their first-grader took away from the unit, and share information on the conversations they were engaging in. When asked what their personal thoughts were on climate change,

those who responded reported that they felt climate change was an urgent issue that needed to be discussed in the classroom.

### **Reflections on the Climate Change Unit**

Children's books and media were used as an entry to many of our conversations about climate change. Background knowledge was prompted with a book about recycling (Bethel, 2008); dislocation and interconnectedness were discussed using a book that showed animals losing their habitat and needing to relocate (French, 2009); Greta Thunberg and the idea of climate activism were introduced with illustrated biographies (Winter, 2019; Tucker, 2019); and the effect of climate change on human life was introduced via a story book about an islander who faces a monster that is consuming her home (Pasquet, 2009/2017). Fiction and narrative non-fiction texts provided context and starting points for conversations about the issues of social justice surrounding climate change. Non-fiction books and dual-purpose books, that contain a story and present information (Boggs et al., 2016), provided me with resources to access the scientific content behind the issues and to present students with concrete evidence of how climate change is impacting the world and who and what is being impacted.

Throughout the unit students were engaged and contributed to classroom conversations by continuously sharing and asking questions. They were using their background knowledge and experiences to build a schema about climate change, human impact, and activism. Students referenced previous classroom experiences, readings, and conversations, indicating the recursive nature of child development and the ways in which they were making sense of climate change in their own lives. After each read-aloud, a conversation followed where students were breaking apart larger ideas and emotions, analyzing with a critical lens, and diving deeper into understanding the phenomenon of climate change. Independently, students worked with literature of all levels. Many students gravitated to spending their exploratory time flipping through and discussing encyclopedias, while others chose to reread or explore new picture books.

One of the challenges of designing this unit around picture books was that in our town's resources (including a municipal library system, the school library, and a teacher's library) there were few books targeted at younger learners. Of the literature available, several had to be scaffolded over a few days prior to a read-aloud and/or needed to be critically consumed. For example, in one of the *Eco-Pig* books (French, 2009) there is a page depicting a polar bear standing in front of Earth. The planet has a thermostat with two ends, one labeled "cool," the other "hot." The polar bear, with a smile on its face, is turning the thermostat to "cool." This page presents a simplistic view of global climate change. The book as a whole is an excellent way to introduce several consequences of human activity, although all of them are animal focused. However, this one page requires a pause. I modeled critical thinking, and asked my class if they thought climate change came down to such a simple issue with such a simple solution. For the most part the students understood that the issue is more complex, but walking them through questioning the text and images is key to developing their skills as critical readers.

Many books on environmental issues that are written for younger students reiterate the ideas of reduce, reuse, and recycle. Some venture into cause and effect, but there's a lack of severity, alarm, and gravity. Books that are written for older children dive in deeper, often presenting wider scientific and political issues that relate to climate change. Non-fiction books that look at renewable energy are often difficult to use with early elementary students. Although illustrations provide an invitation for conversation ("What is that?" "How is this wind used?") there are many ideas that are not broken up into digestible concepts for young children.

There's also a lack of discussion of human consequences in the literature for young children. Most of the books presented problems that are affecting someone/something, but not the reader. This lack of grounding makes global warming appear to be an external threat, not something that all citizens of the world need to combat. I found it challenging to "ground my teaching," in the words of Bill Bigelow (2014). He talks about the importance of bringing the climate message home. Allowing students to see that they can have an impact on a local scale is a powerful way for them to *feel* our interconnectedness across the planet. Building this empathy is essential. While I found it easy to ignite children's empathy when the subject is a cute animal hundreds of miles away, it was harder for students to extend this empathy to everyone in the world, particularly those who are most affected. I found it challenging to bring the message home to the children's own lives and the ways that their community is feeling the impact of climate change.

### **Moving Forward**

As we reflect on the process of incorporating climate change into our teacher preparation program, supporting and designing this unit, and implementing the unit itself, we realized how much we ourselves had to learn. As educators we take an inquiry stance and position ourselves as learners (Cochran-Smith, 2003). However, delving into climate change and how to teach children about the topic was a steep learning curve for us. We faced the limitations of our understanding of the scientific concepts and then the challenge of how to communicate these complex concepts to children. We also struggled with keeping up with the ever-changing shifts in impact of climate change and the magnitude of the impact. And finally, and most important, was the emotional component of this work: how to reconcile the impact of climate change on our lives, the lives of children and future generations, and how to support children's emotional responses, particularly as these might be different from our own. Children might not respond immediately to the information given, instead they might react to it at a later point, and we need to be able to address their questions and concerns when they are ready. Additionally, their fears or concerns might be different than what we expect, however, we need to honor and support their own understanding, as they engage with the topic and make sense of the complexity of climate change.

As we reflected on the unit, we acknowledge that lessons on difficult topics are never over, but require ongoing conversations. We thought about the way that children's literature, particularly a diverse set of texts like the ones used by Denise and Rachel in their lessons, allowed for multiple points of entry into the conversation. Allowing students to access information in different ways meant that each child was able to join at their own level, building from where they were at in the process of understanding climate change, acknowledging differences in understanding, experiences, and prior knowledge of the topic.

Although the unit was taught to first graders, Rachel brought in books geared towards a range of audiences that allowed children to engage in the conversation on multiple levels (Boggs et al., 2016). We wondered what it might look like to have this conversation with children across an entire school year, where students could engage more deeply and revisit the conversations over time. Thinking about our work as teacher educators, how might we prepare teachers to teach climate change and climate justice? What kinds of books would invite conversations about climate change and climate justice? And how do we support teachers to scaffold children's learning around this complex topic, one that we adults are still learning about and trying to understand ourselves?

We envision that we might prepare our students, future teachers, to engage in the topic of climate change across the entire school year, allowing elementary students to delve more deeply into the topic, discuss how it impacts their communities, and come up with ways to address the issues locally. Depending on the

context of the school and community, lessons on climate change and climate justice might take on new meanings and directions.

In her two-week unit, Rachel focused on Greta Thunberg and the role of youth activists to inspire her own students. However, in her reflections she noted that this unit might have looked very different if she had focused on the impact of climate change on the rural community where the school is located. In many of the schools where our students teach, there is a large migration of students from Puerto Rico, climate refugees, whose lives were uprooted by hurricane María in 2017. What might lessons that focus on their experiences look like, and how might teaching about the impact of climate change on our own lives be a powerful tool for change?

As we think about how to support future teachers in engaging in this work, we must collaborate with faculty across discipline areas and connect to organizations, global and local, that are actively engaging in work around climate change and climate justice. The continuity of developing students' understanding across several courses provides opportunities to engage in the work and develop interdisciplinary units and lessons that address the multiple prongs needed to tackle the various aspects and impacts of climate change (Pizmony-Levy & Pallas, 2019). Literature and media provide opportunities for teaching about climate change across discipline areas.

Denise used children's literature in her class to model how students might use books to design a unit, but these texts also served as guides for us as educators to learn about climate change and think about how these books are approaching the topic for children. What are the choices the authors are making and why, and how do the texts themselves support children's understanding of the topic? Lastly, how do we connect ourselves and our students with organizations that are focused on climate change and climate action, to model for our own students what it means to be a lifelong learner, to create connections for them once they have left the teacher education program, and most importantly, to help support their commitments to teaching about climate change and climate justice.

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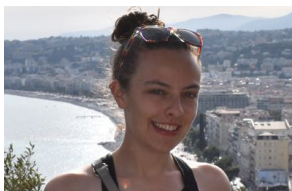
## About the Authors



**Ysaaca Axelrod** is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies in the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She works with pre-service early childhood and elementary education teachers. She is a former kindergarten teacher. Her research interests are in early childhood language and literacy development with a particular focus on emergent bilingual children.



**Denise Ives** is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies in the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She works with pre-service early childhood and elementary education teachers. She is a former elementary school teacher. Her research interests are in child and youth literacies and discourse studies and analysis.



**Rachel Weaver** recently graduated with an MEd in elementary education in the Collaborative Teacher Education Pathway at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her undergraduate degree is in psychology from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and she is deeply committed to teaching for social justice.

# Focus on Friendship or Fights for Civil Rights? Teaching the Difficult History of Japanese American Incarceration through *The Bracelet*

Noreen N. Rodríguez

*“They’re Japanese American,” Luisa<sup>1</sup> stated confidently. Alex volunteered, “They look Japanese but they were born in America!” Paty added, “They’re different.” Victor looked directly at the teacher. “It’s like you, Miss. You was born in China?” he asked tentatively.*

*“Actually, I was born here,” Ms. Ye said gently. “I was born in Texas.”*

*Victor nodded vigorously. “Yeah! You’re Chinese and you was born in America.”*

*Ms. Ye explained, “I would consider myself Chinese American.”*

This interaction during a read-aloud about Japanese American incarceration in Ms. Ye’s second-grade classroom reveals how young learners rarely have opportunities to understand what it means to be Asian American. In schools and society, race is generally presented through a Black/White binary, and Asian American history is largely absent in P-12 schooling and textbooks. The two Asian American historical events that are most often featured in secondary curricula are Chinese American immigration during the 1800s (during the gold rush, to build the transcontinental railroad, and/or the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882) and Japanese American incarceration during World War II (An, 2016). Similarly, Asian American children’s literature overwhelmingly focuses on immigration (albeit across many ethnicities and into the contemporary period) and Japanese American incarceration.

The substantial body of children’s literature on Japanese American incarceration offers early childhood and elementary educators a unique opportunity to introduce the topic to young learners. In particular, these stories provide narratives that depict civil rights injustices beyond the Black and White binary. However, the details of Japanese American incarceration are complex, often taught superficially if at all, and constitute what historians and social studies educators refer to as “difficult history.”

## Japanese American Incarceration as Difficult History

Gross and Terra (2018) propose five criteria that explore what makes difficult histories so difficult to teach and learn: (1) they are central to a nation’s history; (2) they tend to refute widely accepted versions of the past or national values; (3) they connect with current questions or problems; (4) they often involve collective or state-sanctioned violence; and (5) partly due to the previous four conditions, they create disequilibria that may require people to change their assumptions or beliefs.

Japanese American incarceration was a major domestic aspect of U.S. involvement in World War II that, at the time, was purportedly executed in the name of national security. At the behest of the U.S. government, 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans living on the West Coast were forcibly removed from their

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1 All names are pseudonyms.



homes, with their assets frozen, and required by law to live in isolated prison camps surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards, unable to leave of their own accord and without due process.

Recently, the Trump administration used executive order 9066 (EO 9066), issued in response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, as precedent for an Executive Order Trump referred to as a Muslim Ban. These facts are disequilibria-inducing in light of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians study (1983), which found that the exclusion and detention of Japanese Americans due to EO 9066 was unjustified and the result of “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership” (p. 18).

While the teaching of difficult histories, including Japanese American incarceration, has received a great deal of attention in secondary social studies scholarship (Camicia, 2008; Epstein & Peck, 2017; Gross & Terra, 2019; Levy, 2014), it is generally understudied with young learners. Typically, examinations of teaching difficult history to young learners tend to focus on two historical events: enslavement and the Holocaust (Farley, 2009; Patterson & Shuttleworth, 2019; Schweber, 2008; Stanley, 1999; Thomas, Reese, & Horning, 2016). Some scholars argue that such traumatic events should not be taught to young learners at all (Schweber, 2008; Totten, 1999); however, particularly for youth of color and those who hold marginalized identities, these difficult histories may be a part of students’ own family histories, meriting inclusion in ways that are developmentally appropriate without whitewashing or sugarcoating the past (Rodríguez, in press).

Unfortunately, unlike their secondary counterparts, early childhood and elementary educators who complete traditional teacher preparation programs rarely receive in-depth history coursework that might provide them with the content knowledge needed to teach difficult histories in nuanced and developmentally appropriate ways (Bolick, Adams, & Willox, 2010). Moreover, as instructional time dedicated to social studies continues to decline in elementary classrooms (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012), pre-service teachers are unlikely to witness any social studies lessons in practice at all (Hawkman, Castro, Bennett, & Barrow, et al., 2015). In recent years, children’s literature about difficult histories has become increasingly common, from texts that explain and interpret national histories about invasion, conquest, violence, and assimilation (Bradford, 2007) to stories about racial injustice (Rodríguez, in press; Patterson & Shuttleworth, 2019). Yet little research has explored how educators engage young learners in difficult history through children’s literature.

### **Japanese American Children’s Literature**

Given the neat alignment of Japanese American incarceration with Gross and Terra’s (2018) criteria for difficult history, the popularity of children’s literature about this topic might appear unusual. In Wee, Kura, and Kim’s (2018) study of Japanese American children’s literature published between 1990 and 2016, seven of the 37 books in their collection (19 percent) focused on Japanese American incarceration. Upon closer inspection, however, Japanese American children’s literature does not necessarily directly address the aspects that make this history “difficult.” For example, in the seven books about Japanese American incarceration in Wee, Kura, and Kim’s (2018) study, Japanese American youth were depicted “as passive and quiet, not speaking up for themselves, wanting (elders) to stand up for them” (p. 46) in response to mistreatment by White peers. Further, children’s literature often uses the passive voice as a tool to disguise the perpetrators of violence (Rodríguez, 2018), failing to question why events such as enslavement and Japanese American incarceration occurred in the first place and never explicitly naming who created these systems of injustice and how certain individuals benefited from them in myriad ways while others suffered immeasurably.

For these reasons, Japanese American children's literature is not inherently an ideal tool to take up this difficult history. As with any book, the ways in which educators and students take up the text, both visual and written, have tremendous impact on the meaning that readers make. In this essay, I explore how two experienced elementary educators utilized the same famous picture book about Japanese American incarceration in distinct ways and to very different ends. Their divergent approaches illustrate the complexity of teaching difficult histories and the demands made on both educators and students.

### **Teaching Japanese American Incarceration with *The Bracelet***

*The Bracelet* by Yoshiko Uchida (1996) was the common book explored by Ms. Huynh and Ms. Ye, two elementary educators in a large urban public school district in Navarro, Texas. Renowned Japanese American author Yoshiko Uchida has written over 30 books, including a substantial number of children's and young adult fiction about Japanese American incarceration and a memoir of her own family's imprisonment in Topaz, Utah (Harada, 1998).

*The Bracelet* describes a Japanese American family's experience leaving their home and friends after EO 9066 was issued, as they are forced to board a bus and live in temporary barracks fashioned out of former horse stalls at the Tanforan Racetrack in California. Streamas (1997) describes the book's plot as "interracial friendship triumph(ing) over internment" (p. 127), while Potucek (1995) considers the book to be primarily a friendship story that necessitates only "a simple discussion of the relocation and internment" (p. 568).

Ms. Ye and Ms. Huynh were both experienced teachers who attended a district workshop about Asian Pacific Islander Heritage Month. They received copies of *The Bracelet*, which was recommended as one means to teach Japanese American incarceration. The receipt of the book, accompanied by the professional development they received about Japanese American incarceration at the workshop, inspired them to use the book in their classrooms.

Ms. Huynh had worked in elementary schools for 10 years and, at the time of the study, was teaching in a third-grade classroom at a small elementary campus. Her school was located in a predominantly White and affluent neighborhood, but was ethno-racially diverse due to the local university's graduate student housing located within the school's boundaries. Despite her many years of working with young students, Ms. Huynh had rarely taught social studies and had never taught Japanese American incarceration before.

Ms. Ye had worked in elementary schools for eight years. At the time of the study, she was teaching second grade at a large Title I school. Her class consisted of Latinx, Black, and mixed race students. Although Ms. Ye was relatively new to teaching second grade, she had experience teaching third grade, which included reading aloud *Sylvia and Aki* (Conkling, 2011), a chapter book about Japanese American incarceration and Mexican American school segregation.

Both teachers invited me into their classrooms during the Spring 2016 semester, where I observed them teach multiple lessons about Asian American history. They also participated in several semi-structured interviews and reviewed examples of student work with me over the course of the semester. Their lessons with *The Bracelet* were the first instances of Asian American history teaching that I observed in their respective classrooms.

## Teaching *The Bracelet* as a Social-Emotional Story of Friendship

Although Ms. Huynh admitted that social studies was not one of her teaching strengths, she considered herself to “have a huge focus on community and social skills building.” Social-emotional learning (SEL) was a recently implemented district-wide initiative that she happily took up and infused throughout the day and across content areas. Consequently, SEL was a major theme in her teaching of *The Bracelet*.

She introduced the book by explaining, “Today’s story that we’re going to read is going to conjure up some SEL types of ideas on what a friend is, how we should treat people, how we should treat strangers, and judging others.” Before reading, she asked students to turn and talk to a partner about what friends do and say and how they should treat each other. Students discussed the prompts in pairs, then shared aloud with the rest of the group before Ms. Huynh proceeded to read *The Bracelet*.

As she shared the front cover of the book with the class, Ms. Huynh reiterated, “I really want you to think about how we should treat people even if we’re not friends, and what’s wrong with judging people based on their race, or maybe their religion or their culture.” She then introduced the text: “This book is called *The Bracelet*, and it happens in a time after World War II.” This introduction was factually incorrect—the story takes place shortly after the United States joined the war. Ms. Huynh did not provide students with any additional historical context for the book before reading.

Throughout her read-aloud, Ms. Huynh stopped periodically to ask students to reflect on the events in the text. Her questions overwhelmingly focused on characters’ emotions: “How are Emi [Japanese American main character] and Laurie [Emi’s White American friend] feeling about going to [prison] camp?” “Her action is slamming the door. She went from feeling one way to a different way. How is she feeling now?” “Have you ever lost anything that’s important to you? How did it make you feel?”

While these questions emerged from events in the book, they ultimately focused on students’ emotions and did not provide opportunities for them to reflect upon how the unfolding events inspired specific emotions in the novel’s characters. Ms. Huynh’s focus on emotional expression and individual student examples and connections decentered the plot of *The Bracelet*.

For example, when Emi says goodbye to Laurie before her family is forced to leave their home, Emi’s frustration and anger are evident in her slamming of the front door. Emi is upset because her family’s forced removal and relocation is unjustified: they have committed no acts of disloyalty, yet because of their Japanese heritage, they must leave their home, friends, and lives behind. She is a child, yet along with everyone else of Japanese descent, she is considered a threat to national security.

Ms. Huynh’s question about this scene pivoted away from the plot. After asking students how Emi was feeling when she slammed the door, she asked if any of them had ever slammed a door and if it was okay to feel mad. The conversation shifted away from the injustice wrought against Japanese Americans—and did not attend at all to the notion that what was happening was unjust. Instead it centered the various ways the third graders expressed their anger, and was followed by discussion of coping mechanisms such as taking deep breaths and counting.

After the scene when Emi’s family arrives at Tanforan and discovers their new home will be a horse stable, Ms. Huynh stopped to ask students what they were thinking. She proposed, “What if I said, ‘All the kids

with blonde hair, pack up your bags and move to the horse stables?” Students began to talk excitedly, as some were indignant and others were entertained and giggling. While one student declared, “That’s unfair!” another asked, “Miss, can I go too?” Another child volunteered, “Me too, I want to go!”

Although Ms. Huynh had tried to illustrate the arbitrary nature of Japanese American removal on the West Coast in her example, students excitedly focused on the possibility of going to a place with horses. Their confusion suggested a lack of understanding (there were no longer horses at Tanforan because it had been converted from a racetrack to an assembly center for Japanese American detainees) and their enthusiasm demonstrated a lack of empathy. Moreover, Ms. Huynh struggled to redirect them and resumed reading without clarifying why she had proposed what she did or why the U.S. government considered horse stables to be appropriate housing for Japanese Americans during wartime.

The book concluded, and Ms. Huynh quickly read the afterword, which supplied the historical context otherwise missing from the read-aloud. Unlike her approach to the primary text of the book, Ms. Huynh read the short paragraphs of the afterword quickly, without pausing to check for student understanding. When we spoke later, Ms. Huynh admitted, “I don’t think I’m very strong in teaching history, but I’m comfortable teaching community because I feel that in my classroom.”

While she was proud of herself for teaching content that was new to herself and to her students, she said, “I was kind of just treading water, trying to learn the content and teaching about the internment camps... [it] really stretched me [as a teacher].” Ms. Huynh’s comments suggested that her feelings of discomfort regarding history may have resulted in her deliberately avoiding the historical aspects of the book in favor of the SEL components with which she felt more instructional confidence. This seemed especially evident in her lack of clarification during the Tanforan scene and her hurried approach to the afterword.

Given Ms. Huynh’s emphasis on SEL and the lack of historical contextualization, the class concluded *The Bracelet* with little understanding of Japanese American incarceration. Instead, Japanese American incarceration was a blurry background to a story about friendship. Not until her follow-up activity did Ms. Huynh clarify that the camps in which families like Emi’s lived were “prison camp[s]—this is not a summer camp.”

Students’ misunderstanding of the nature of the isolated and inhospitable camps in which Japanese Americans were forced to live demonstrated the lack of attention paid to the historical content of the story. Ultimately, this light-handed and ahistorical approach evaded the facts that make Japanese American incarceration a difficult history, allowing the theme of friendship to take precedence. However, despite Ms. Huynh’s prefacing of the book as a story about friendship, her emphasis on SEL throughout the reading lessened the importance given to this theme as well.

### **Teaching *The Bracelet* as Part of the Ongoing Fight for Civil Rights**

While Ms. Huynh read *The Bracelet* in a single day, Ms. Ye structured her lesson over the course of three days. On the first day, Ms. Ye shared “a picture flood” with her second-grade students, providing an assortment of primary source photos from the Library of Congress depicting EO 9066 and Japanese Americans as they loaded buses and lived in desert and mountain camps. She asked students to think aloud as they studied the images and formulated questions. During this picture flood, Ms. Ye remained silent, rotating around the room recording all the questions she heard.

The next day, she began by reviewing the student questions that emerged during the picture flood: “I want us to be thinking about some of these questions that you were asking [yesterday].” Each question was written neatly on a sticky note and posted on the easel that stood in the corner of the carpet, where they could be viewed by all (Figure 1). Students eagerly began to discuss the questions before them. “We’re gonna find out why, we’re going to find out what is it that happened... who forced them there and why did that happen,” Ms. Ye explained. “Can we ask questions while you’re reading?” one student inquired. “Definitely!” Ms. Ye affirmed.

Ms. Ye began reading. A few pages in, she paused. “Listen carefully to this part,” she said. “This is gonna help us answer some of our questions.” As she continued reading, one student, Symphony, murmured to herself. Ms. Ye noticed Symphony’s response to the text and encouraged her to share her thoughts aloud with the group. “The government made them go to the camp... maybe because they were bad, I think?” she offered tentatively. Ms. Ye prompted Symphony to further explain her thinking: “So the government made them go to the camp because they were...” “Japanese?” Symphony answered. “Because they were Japanese,” Ms. Ye repeated. “Was there something else?”

“And they looked like the enemy?” Symphony’s hesitation led to a prolonged conversation as more and more students engaged in the discussion, trying to determine why Emi’s and other Japanese American families were forced to leave their homes. Although Ms. Ye did repeat one line from the text for clarification (“The government was sending them to a prison camp because they were Japanese Americans and America was at war with Japan” [Uchida, 1996, n.p.]), this student-led conversation unpacking the first part of the book lasted for over eight minutes. During this time, students questioned what kind of camp Emi’s family was going to and made comparisons to the treatment experienced by African Americans and Native Americans that they had learned about in previous picture books.

One student, Alejandro, connected the phrase “prison camp” to jail. “Prison—it’s not a good word,” he said. “It’s like jail.” “Tell us about that,” Ms. Ye urged. “Why would someone be in prison in the first place?” Several students responded, “Because they did something bad” and “You do something wrong.” Ms. Ye began to paraphrase their statements when one student protested, “But they didn’t do nothing wrong! They’re just taking them ‘cause of the way they look!”

Students continued to eagerly explain what they understood to be happening in the text. Symphony thrust her hand up and announced, “I wonder if at the prison camp, there’s only Japanese.” Ms. Ye replied, “That’s great wondering. Will you write this down?” She repeated Symphony’s question and continued reading. A few minutes later, during the scene when the family discovers they will be living in a former horse stall, Alejandro muttered, “That’s messed up!” Ms. Ye paused and said, “I just heard Alejandro, he went, ‘That’s messed up!’ Turn to your partner real quick and talk about why that’s messed up.”

Ms. Ye created space for students to create their own questions about the text and used individual comments and utterings during the read-aloud to guide understanding for the larger group. Importantly, *The Bracelet* was not the first time students had read about injustice. During their prolonged conversation at the start of the book, one student referenced a prior read-aloud about Native Americans, while others referred to readings about the anti-Black racism experienced by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela. In this way, students were already attuned to noticing instances of discrimination and injustice; Ms. Ye did not need to establish this frame for them book by book.

Ms. Ye was deliberate about providing her second-grade students with ample discussion time during the read-aloud; she let them know before reading that they would take two days to complete the book, despite it only being 32 pages long. This was an important part of her teaching philosophy:

For them to question and know that it's okay to question. I think that's why, when those things come up, I'm not afraid to talk about it, because why not talk about it? When else are you going to have another opportunity to talk about it? If that's a question you have, let's talk about that. I feel like sometimes my kids go back and forth between "Oh, that was a really great conversation" versus "Oh, we want to finish the book." I'm like, it's okay to not finish the book. I enjoy having these conversations with you. We are all smarter because of these conversations.

Ms. Ye's commitment to creating ample opportunities for student questions, and her scaffolding and paraphrasing when such questions arose, facilitated rich conversations around injustice and discrimination. The third day, when they concluded *The Bracelet*, students discussed patriotism and unpacked why Emi had to go to the prison camp but her friend Laurie did not. Several students explained that Laurie didn't have to go because "she wasn't Japanese." Symphony added, "She was just regular."

Ms. Ye used this statement as an anchor for deeper investigation. "What do you mean by regular?" As students tried to provide examples of what a "regular" person was like, Ms. Ye asked what it meant to be different. Finally, acutely aware that every one of her students was a child of color, she asked, "Do any of us in this room look like [Laurie]? Does that mean that all of us are not regular?" Without uttering the word race, Ms. Ye led a powerful conversation with her second-grade students about who is considered American and worked with them to decenter normative Whiteness.

After completing *The Bracelet*, Ms. Ye asked students, "What are some ideas that you have about how the civil rights of the Japanese Americans were taken away, and how they were treated?" While the conversations from the previous day had alluded to injustice and racial profiling, Ms. Ye clearly articulated the events of the story as examples of civil rights violations. Consequently, the class discussion about who is considered "normal" or "regular" segued into ways that people justify unequal treatment of others, and connected to previous conversations about injustice.

### **The Challenges of Teaching Japanese American Incarceration through Children's Literature**

Ms. Ye's lesson about Japanese American incarceration using *The Bracelet* was a masterful example of the possibilities of having complex conversations with young children about issues with which adults often struggle. Ms. Huynh's lesson illustrated a far more typical dilemma: How can teachers discuss difficult histories when students (and even teachers themselves) lack historical background/context? The juxtaposition of these two teachers' approaches to the same book, and the vastly different student responses that resulted, offers some insight into the challenges and opportunities posed by children's literature about difficult history.

The teachers' initial framing of *The Bracelet* served an important role in establishing how students responded to the text. Ms. Huynh's third graders anticipated a friendship story and were relatively unconcerned with the actions of the government that occurred in the background of the text. And while the SEL focus could have allowed students to examine the causes of the emotions expressed, those opportunities were overlooked. Ms. Ye's second graders began the book with questions about an unknown historical event; their approach was that of detectives intent upon discovering clues and answers to their questions.

More importantly, the broader context of the lessons also impacted students' responses: Ms. Huynh's class had been reading a range of unrelated picture books prior to this lesson, while Ms. Ye's class had read many picture books about African American history in the weeks before they encountered *The Bracelet*. For Ms. Huynh's class, *The Bracelet* was a new text about the familiar topic of friendship. Ms. Ye's class was exposed to a new type of discrimination beyond the Black/White binary.

Ms. Ye's use of a picture flood served a number of important purposes prior to reading *The Bracelet*. First, it situated the book within a particular historical context. Students' interaction with primary sources made clear that, while the story they read might be fiction, it mirrored real experiences of people in the past. Ms. Huynh introduced the book solely as a friendship story, providing no indication that the story was based on historical events and the experiences of real people.

Second, the picture flood gave Ms. Ye's students an opportunity to generate their own observations and questions about the sources before them. When they began the book, students were highly interested in discovering the answers to their questions and engaged with the text much more eagerly and deeply than most of Ms. Huynh's students, who anticipated a story of friendship and demonstrated less interest in the historical events in the text.

Third, some of the primary sources selected were directly connected to illustrations in the book. For example, the photo of a storefront sign stating, "I am an American" mirrored an illustrated storefront sign in the book that declared, "We are loyal Americans." By the time students saw the illustration in the book on the second day of the lesson, they had already spent time wrestling with the meaning and significance of a similar phrase. The various degrees of sense-making that had already taken place added greater nuance to their understanding of the scene when they saw the phrase in the book, within the context of Emi's story.

### **Recommendations for Classroom Practice**

The use of primary sources to complement narrative text was particularly powerful with young students who have yet to learn American history. While neither group of students had learned about Japanese American incarceration before reading the novel, Ms. Ye's class was familiar with multiple examples of discrimination and racism in U.S. history. Several of Ms. Huynh's students revealed a range of knowledge about World War II, albeit in Europe, rather than domestically, after reading *The Bracelet*.

When young students are relatively, or entirely, unfamiliar with American history, they often default to popular narratives of ongoing progress and American exceptionalism. More importantly, history is often told to young learners through a singular omniscient, Eurocentric perspective that omits historically marginalized groups and/or multiple perspectives, concluding with happy endings of a post-racial society where individualism and meritocracy triumph over adversity. The introduction of primary sources, particularly of individuals omitted from the master narrative of U.S. history (Takaki, 2008), created space for students to interpret historical artifacts within and beyond their existing schema.

While social studies researchers have examined the impact of such critical historical thinking with secondary students (Salinas, Blevins & Sullivan, 2012), less scholarship has explored how similar work might help young learners (re)consider the historical narrative and their developing understandings of *who* is considered American and a citizen (Rodríguez, 2018).

As young students are just beginning to learn about U.S. history in elementary school, educators must be careful when presenting historical narratives that serve to counter master narratives that students have yet to fully comprehend. For example, the master narrative of U.S. involvement in World War II is that the United States joined the war in response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and thereafter played an active role in demanding an end to Hitler's dictatorship and grossly dehumanizing actions.

The more complex version of events, including Japanese American incarceration, is often saved for high school. Therefore, when Japanese American incarceration is presented to young learners, it is generally done so through picture books (rather than textbooks) without important context such as a century of pre-existing anti-Asian sentiment and immigration legislation. Moreover, these books typically emphasize Japanese American resilience and survival while omitting why Japanese Americans were targeted specifically and very differently from Italian and German Americans. In an educational atmosphere that continues to deemphasize social studies time in the classroom (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012), the introduction of complicated historical narratives and counternarratives is not easy work and it requires educators to commit to contextualization, explanation, and constant revisiting of historical concepts.

Educators who are interested in taking up the challenge of teaching difficult histories to young learners can add nuance to the limited narratives found in picture books by supplementing the text (before, during, and after reading) with primary sources, timelines, and maps. Together, these social studies tools can firmly establish that students are learning about events from the past that impacted real people and provide important historical context. Moreover, students need to be exposed to multiple perspectives of historical events in order to recognize how groups of people were affected differently; these perspectives can vary based on age, class, geography, or other markers of identity.

In the case of Japanese American incarceration, a number of options are available that provide diverse youth perspectives of life in World War II prison camps; while *The Bracelet* is an excellent starting point, it must not also be the end point of a unit on Japanese American incarceration. As illustrated in the contrasting approaches of Ms. Huynh and Ms. Ye, educators should invite students to ask questions about these histories and texts throughout their learning, allowing their own curiosities and connections to guide conversations rather than determining a single instructional theme in advance and adhering strictly to it.

Teorey (2008) argues that Uchida and other authors of Japanese American incarceration present and analyze their experiences "to teach all Americans to destroy social barriers, stand up to ignorance and intolerance, and build inclusive, multicultural communities" (p. 240). However, whether or not these lessons are actually executed for these purposes is dependent on the ways in which students and educators engage with the written and visual text. For example, both the cover and front matter of *The Bracelet* prominently feature the numbered tags that were given to all Japanese Americans who were detained and taken to prison camps; these tags were overlooked by both the teachers and students in this study, but could have been the source of rich discussion about dehumanization.

Many picture books about Japanese American incarceration focus on the popularity of organized youth baseball at the camps (Harada, 1996; Moss, 2013); yet, if educators solely focus on the patriotism and ingenuity of those incarcerated or how baseball gave them a sense of freedom in the midst of terrible circumstances, the misguided rationale behind incarceration is lost. Children's literature about Japanese American incarceration can present a difficult history for students to wrestle with, or it can uphold master narratives of American progress and tenacity. Educators play a vital role in determining which path students will take.



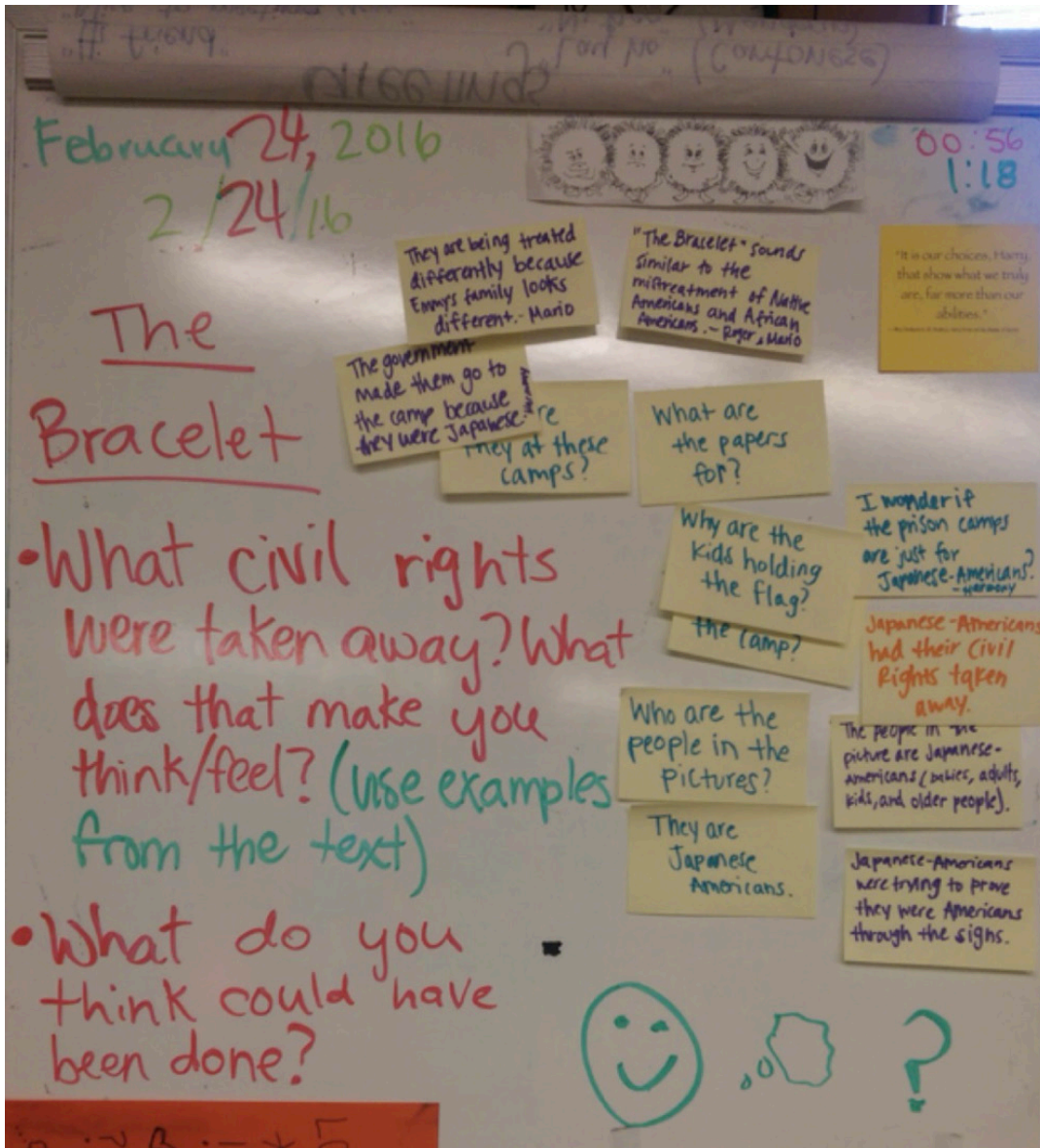


Figure 1. Student-generated Questions from Library of Congress Primary Source Set on Japanese American Incarceration in Ms. Ye's Classroom

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### About the Author



**Noreen Naseem Rodríguez** is an assistant professor of elementary social studies in the School of Education at Iowa State University. Her research interests include Asian American education, educators of color, the teaching of difficult histories, and critical uses of diverse children's literature. Rodríguez was a bilingual elementary teacher in Texas for nine years and is the recipient of the 2019 Early Career Award from the Children's Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English. Her work has been published in *Theory & Research in Social Education*, *The Journal of Children's Literature*, *School Library Journal*, and *Literacy Today*.

# Gender-Inclusive Children’s Literature as a Preventative Measure: Moving Beyond a Reactive Approach to LGBTQ+ Topics in the Classroom

Shelby Brody

I began my teaching career as a fifth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at a no-excuses charter school. Despite my lack of formal training, I was hired as a head teacher and thrown into the proverbial deep end with only a week’s worth of “behavior management” training under my belt. A side effect of the paucity of training was the impression that a teacher’s responsibility was to “tell” students what they should know rather than guide them toward new understandings. This dictatorial model of teaching resulted in a tense environment where teachers, myself included, stood at the ready, eyes peeled for opportunities to correct, to “tell” students where they had erred, rather than adopting a more responsive approach.

Once, during an ELA class, a student named Brendan<sup>1</sup> remarked that the task I had assigned was “so gay.” I lost my temper. Cartoon steam shot out of my ears. I pulled Brendan aside at the end of class and *told* him, in no uncertain terms, how wrong he was to call an assignment “gay.” I *told* him that “gay” did not mean “stupid” and that his word choice was offensive. I *told* him that he did not know who in his community might identify as gay and how harmful his language was. I *told* him never to use the word “gay” as an insult again.

I feel certain that this interaction had little effect on Brendan’s attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community. It is unlikely that he walked away from my irate lecture considering how his comments may have harmed LGBTQ+ members of our school community who had yet to come out or who were grappling with their identity, as many middle school students are. He probably walked away thinking that I was mean and that I had overreacted to what he likely perceived as an inconsequential comment.

During the year that I taught Brendan, I still identified publicly as a heterosexual cisgender woman, despite my needling sense that neither of these labels was accurate. I ached for words that matched how I perceived my own gender. When I found those words a year later, I still hesitated to refer to myself as “non-binary” or “queer” in classrooms where relatively more common words like “gay” were weaponized with such regularity. When I look back on that interaction with Brendan, what strikes me is how I failed to recognize a teachable moment. Yes, Brendan’s comment was harmful, but it also represented a misunderstanding around LGBTQ+ topics and identities. At the time, I assumed that all fifth-graders knew the dictionary definition of the word “gay.” Now I’m not so sure.

In their book, *Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-Inclusive Instruction in the Elementary Classroom*, former elementary teachers Caitlyn L. Ryan and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth (2018) illustrate the need for LGBTQ-inclusive instruction through a series of case studies. One case study describes the experience of fourth- and fifth-grade educator Gloria Kauffmann. She noticed that her students often used LGBTQ+ terminology as a way of insulting one another, but upon further investigation, discovered that they did not actually know the meaning of the words:

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1 Pseudonym.

They reported hearing these words as insults from other youth, but they had no adult sources of information explaining these identities. They just knew that calling someone “gay” was powerful, negative, and meant to regulate the behavior of students who didn’t fit in. (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018, pp. 26)

Kauffman determined that her students were using these words as insults because that was the only context in which they had encountered the words before (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). It seems possible, if not probable, that Brendan’s understanding of the word “gay” was similar to that of the children in Gloria Kauffman’s classroom.

Words have power. LGBTQ+ vocabulary, in particular, has the power both to affirm and to vilify. Educators, in our position as gatekeepers of information, have the opportunity to provide the context behind LGBTQ+ vocabulary. It is our responsibility to seize the opportunity and provide all children with the language necessary to understand and empathize with the queer experience, particularly the experience of non-binary trans people and gender nonconforming people.

I identify as a non-binary queer educator. For most of my life, I harbored the sense that I was neither girl nor boy, man nor woman. Only recently did I come out personally, and then professionally. It is important to note that while I claim the terms “non-binary” and “queer,” these terms cannot be universally applied to all gender-expansive people. I also must acknowledge my privilege in being able to claim these terms without fearing for my personal safety.

Having made the decision not to medically transition, I am perceived as a White woman by most, which affords me the privilege of safety that many visibly transgender and gender nonconforming people do not have, particularly transgender and gender nonconforming people of color (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2016, as cited by Rajunov & Duane, 2019). My experiences as a non-binary teacher and human being made me wonder how we can make our world safer for and more accepting of transgender and gender nonconforming people, and I believe that begins by explicitly teaching all children about transgender and gender nonconforming identities, beginning with establishing a shared vocabulary.

When considering the development of gender-inclusive curricula, I acknowledge that my position is somewhat problematic. The act of “defining” non-binary trans identities and gender nonconforming identities reinforces the male-female gender binary, because we define these identities in relation to the binary concepts of “man” and “woman.” I wonder, then, if it is a fool’s errand to explicitly teach gender-inclusive vocabulary to children in schools. If we insist, for example, on one definition of “non-binary” or “gender nonconforming,” are we simply imposing more parameters on people’s gender identity and expression (Keenan, 2017)? I believe the answer to this question is a resounding “yes” if we fail to acknowledge the limitations of these labels as we teach them.

The unfortunate reality is that we educators participate daily in a system that reinforces the gender binary. Some of the ways in which the American education system perpetuates the gender binary include “record keeping, facilities (bathrooms), and activities (like sports)” (Keenan, 2017, p. 545), but this is hardly the beginning of the gender binary’s influence on the lives of children. Children begin to use culturally defined gender labels at around two years old (Gender Justice in Early Childhood, 2017). They are entrenched in the binary gender system long before they cross the threshold into their pre-kindergarten classrooms.

To ignore the existence of the gender binary when teaching children about gender identity would be a missed opportunity. Leading children to examine and question the gender binary is a perfect example of meeting children at their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 79-91). In order to effectively teach children about the lived experience of transgender and gender nonconforming people, we need to help them make the connection to their prior understandings of gender, particularly to the dominant cultural understandings around gender that they have internalized.

It is not just a missed opportunity, however. The failure to normalize these identities is a form of violence, and the lack of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula in schools is dangerous. Students who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community are at higher risk of dropping out, being bullied, and completing suicide (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). Researchers at the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that more than eight in 10 LGBTQ+ students experienced harassment or assault at school (Kosciw et. al, 2018). However, the most recent GLSEN School Climate Survey found that: “LGBTQ students in schools with an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum are less likely to feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation (41.8% vs. 63.3%) and gender expression (34.6 percent vs. 47.0 percent)” (Kosciw et. al, 2018).

We cannot afford to be simply reactive to LGBTQ+ topics when the physical and emotional safety of children is at stake. Normalizing LGBTQ+ topics by explicitly teaching them and then by folding them into our elementary school curricula is one preventative measure all educators can take to stave off the gender- and sexuality-based bullying and harassment reported by middle and high school students.

Adults treat LGBTQ+ identities as difficult topics. There is a great deal of uncertainty on the part of educators about how best to address the LGBTQ+ community in a way that is both respectful and informative (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). Even teachers with the best intentions are paralyzed by their fear of misspeaking or offending, resulting in the low percentage of LGBTQ+ curricula that we see in K-12 schools (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

The easiest course of action is to brush LGBTQ+ concepts under the rug until an “issue” arises. We have a student with gay parents, so we read *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman & Cornell, 2016). We have a gender nonconforming student, so we read *Sparkle Boy* (Newman & Mola, 2017). A student comes into school wondering what the word “transgender” means, so we read *Introducing Teddy* (Walton & MacPherson, 2016) or *I Am Jazz!* (Herthel, Jennings, & McNicholas, 2014).

The danger of adopting this reactive approach to the appearance of LGBTQ+ topics is that it turns the LGBTQ+ student that catalyzed the inclusion of these texts into a “special guest” (Malatino, 2015, p. 398). The “special guest” approach has the opposite of the desired effect, because it trains the spotlight on what makes LGBTQ+ people different from their cis-hetero<sup>2</sup> peers. Additionally, the reactive approach to LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom increases the likelihood that there will be only one transgender narrative shared with students, and often, that narrative is of the “if you come out, people will still love you for who you are!” variety (Adichie, 2009; Malatino, 2015). This is not to say there is no value in texts centered on the narrative of acceptance, but educators must take care to share a wide range of LGBTQ+ narratives, including narratives that address gender-based harassment and discrimination as well as narratives that feature characters of color.

When queer identities are not embedded within the curriculum from day one, our reactive attempts at remedying the lack of inclusion with a single picture book transform queerness into a disruptive spectacle.

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2 Cis-hetero is short for cisgender and heterosexual.

These attempts at educating around this perceived difficult topic are better than nothing. However, one read-aloud about queerness is like a band-aid: it may answer children's questions in the moment but it's only a temporary fix, a single reference point. And assuming that we can wait until a topic arises in our classrooms to address it relegates the queer community to non-essential status. If standard early childhood curricula are any indication, then queer people are optional fixtures in daily life, whereas planes, trains, and automobiles are not.

I do not assume any ill intent on the part of educators who have adopted this reactive approach. However, most educators lack the critical gender literacy to adequately address the complex world of LGBTQ+ topics (Woolley, 2015). Therefore, it stands to reason that the safest course of action is to exclude this community from curriculum, addressing LGBTQ+ topics only when they are immediately relevant to the classroom.

It goes without saying, I hope, that this practice is damaging to the LGBTQ+ community. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) posits that books are "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors," yet it is rare that LGBTQ+ children see themselves in the curriculum, let alone in a read-aloud. What might happen if LGBTQ+ people were featured casually throughout the classroom and curriculum? What would it be like if we welcomed queerness into our classrooms without making it into something "difficult," something to tiptoe around, something best saved for the moment when the adult in the room feels confident enough to address it without the fear of making a mistake?

The irony in all of this is that the earlier we introduce children to these topics, the more receptive they appear to be. In his essay describing coming out as a transmasculine non-binary person to his 4- and 14-year-old children, CK Combs (2019) writes, "The easiest part of this coming out process was talking to my kids" (p. 96). His 4-year-old child had no difficulty referring to him using "he/him" pronouns while also calling him "mommy" (Combs, 2019, p. 96). Combs writes that his 14-year-old needed more support in order to understand the transition, suggesting that the binary gender Kool-Aid works very quickly to limit our perceptions of what is acceptable. As educators, it is our responsibility to prevent rather than to react. In this vein, consider LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum as powdered Vitamin C and regular handwashing rather than as band-aids or emergency surgery.

While I am advocating for making a more concerted effort to normalize the LGBTQ+ community by including a range of LGBTQ+ narratives in our classroom libraries and embedding our experiences into existing curricula, I also feel it is essential to explicitly teach elementary-age children about gender expansiveness. Therefore, as the culmination of my graduate coursework at Bank Street College of Education, I designed a curriculum about gender expansiveness for children ages 8 to 11. The decision to focus on these ages was intentional. In middle childhood, children deepen their understanding of "behaviors associated with assimilation of the sex role assigned to males and females in society" (Cohen, 1988, p. 217).

It is significant at this age, therefore, to introduce the concept of "transitional models" within the gender spectrum, in order to challenge the developmentally typical notion that there is one way to be a male and one way to be a female (Cohen, 1988, pp. 231-234). My curriculum seeks to develop critical gender literacy by first naming and examining the gender binary and then by sharing a diverse range of stories about transgender and gender nonconforming people, both real and imaginary (Woolley, 2015, p. 391).

Toward the middle to end of fifth grade, many children have begun puberty and are more self-conscious than they were at 8, 9, or even 10 years old (Wood, 2015). At age 11, children spend more time on social media and the internet, where they will invariably be introduced to gender nonconforming or gender expansive

identities (Wood, 2015; Wortham, 2018). They also begin to form cliques and to judge their peers more harshly than at younger ages (Wood, 2015). Before children become centered on the concept of “belonging” to their social group, it is essential to educate them about the truth of gender: that it is not fixed but, rather, fluid (Wood, 2015; Keenan, 2017; Gender Justice in Early Childhood, 2017).

In *The 2017 National School Climate Survey*, roughly 25 percent of respondents identified as transgender or non-binary, and 11 percent of respondents identified as genderqueer (Kosciw et al., 2018). With more than one-third of high school students identifying outside the established gender binary of “male” and “female,” providing middle-childhood students with a shared vocabulary and understanding of gender expansiveness is one way of educating more accepting and empathetic students (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Understanding gender expansiveness requires students to think outside of themselves. At 8 years old, children are interested in issues of fairness and justice (Wood, 2015). Around this age, children also develop the ability to be more objective in their reasoning and to think beyond their lived experience (Cohen, 1988). Between the ages of 8 and 11, children become more aware of society’s expectations, while developing their own sense of morality (Cohen, 1988). As children of this age are exposed to more subtle social dynamics, adults are in a powerful position to model anti-biased attitudes toward diverse cultures and identities (Cohen, 1988).

This curriculum responds to the 8- to 11-year-old child’s developing sense of morality by emphasizing the wide range of LGBTQ+ lived experiences and by fostering empathy for transgender and gender nonconforming people in particular. Throughout the curriculum, students define LGBTQ+ vocabulary and use it to ground discussions about sometimes abstract, likely unfamiliar topics. As each new vocabulary word is introduced, the teacher reiterates that these terms are not one-size-fits-all and reminds students that every person has the right to choose the words used to describe them. The textual and visual media used throughout the curriculum intentionally includes a broad range of gender-expansive narratives in order to avoid the oversimplification of trans and gender nonconforming experiences and identities.

I spent a great deal of time searching for books that would help me achieve the goal of including a spectrum of gender-expansive narratives. One of my most valuable discoveries was the recent picture book *It Feels Good to Be Yourself! A Book About Gender Identity* by author Theresa Thorn and illustrator Noah Grigni (2019). Thorn offers kid-friendly definitions for essential terms, using fictional characters as a vehicle for defining words such as “cisgender,” “transgender,” and “non-binary.” Thorn takes care to speak to the range of identities that can be captured under a single umbrella term. For example, there are two simple definitions for “non-binary.” One of the non-binary characters in the book, Alex, is “both a boy and a girl” while the other non-binary character, JJ, is “neither a boy nor a girl.” Toward the middle of the book, Thorn writes: “Just like there are many different ways to be a boy or a girl, there are many different ways to be non-binary—too many to fit in a book” (Thorn & Grigni, 2019). Thorn’s child-friendly exploration of gender is brought to life by Grigni’s jewel-toned illustrations, which depict people with a range of gender expressions, skin tones, and abilities.

This past year, I served as the co-facilitator of my school’s third- and fourth-grade Gender Spectrum Alliance (GSA), an optional interest group where students could come to learn more about the gender spectrum and gender expansiveness. Before winter break, I shared *It Feels Good to Be Yourself!* with the students in our GSA. When we reconvened after winter break, we reviewed the definitions we had learned. To my delight, students were able to recall the two specific definitions of “non-binary” that Thorn offers in the text. When we finished recording those definitions on the board, another student chimed in to remind everyone that these were not the *only* definitions of non-binary.



Before moving on to our next discussion topic, I asked the students if they had any questions about non-binary identities. I was met with shrugs and silence. They were not deterred by the concept of gender expansiveness, so simply captured by Thorn when she writes, “And even with all these possible ways to be, some kids don’t feel any of the words they know fit them exactly right. There are a never-ending number of ways to be yourself in the world” (Thorn & Grigni, 2019). Perhaps, I thought, gender expansiveness isn’t such a difficult topic to teach to children after all. These children seemed willing to accept that, despite our attempts to slap labels on people (and on ourselves), words used to describe gender identity are rife with limitations.

In the first week of my curriculum, I use *It Feels Good to Be Yourself!* as a jumping-off point for discussing gender, because it provides students with a common vocabulary around gender as well as an understanding that the vocabulary presented is far from an exhaustive list. As I sought out other books to include in the curriculum, however, I noticed a number of trends—narratives that appear over and over again and that, when presented in the absence of books featuring non-binary or gender nonconforming characters, perpetuate the single story of being transgender (Adichie, 2009).

In the past 10 years, trans-inclusive children’s literature has become more readily available. There are plenty of books that tell stories of transition. In particular, there are books that tell stories about White transgender girls who were assigned male at birth or about male children who are experimenting with a more stereotypically feminine gender expression. From picture books to middle grade books to young adult books, these stories are available in relative abundance.

Many of the books include popular tropes. Usually there is a supportive mom character and a reluctant (or even blatantly transphobic) dad character who comes around at the end. These are usually transition stories or coming out stories that end with a sense of acceptance and safety. Generally speaking, they play one note, addressing the culture of misogyny that makes it socially unacceptable for boys to wear dresses or play with dolls and assuring the reader that this widely held view is not the truth. Of course, there are children who see themselves in such narratives, and for that reason alone, these stories are valuable additions to the children’s literature scene and to our classroom libraries (Bishop, 1990). However, educators need to ensure that our classroom libraries reflect a wider range of identities, including characters who identify as gender-expansive or who identify as people of color.

Another popular mode of depicting transgender and gender nonconforming characters is through fantasy and anthropomorphism. Trans-adjacent tales such as *Neither* (Anderson, 2018) and *Red: A Crayon’s Story* (Hall, 2015) can be shared as analogies for the transgender experience. But if these are the only stories that children are exposed to, transgender and gender nonconforming identities are once again relegated to the world of fantasy. This trend continues into middle-grade literature, such as in the graphic novel *Witch Boy* (Ostertag, 2017), the story of a boy who wants to be a witch rather than a shifter like the other men in his community. I wonder about the effect of conflating transgender experiences with fantasy. What if a child only sees their identity represented as something unfit for the “real” world?

There are even fewer stories about transgender boys assigned female at birth, which speaks to our cultural reality that people with female bodies have more license to wear pants and play sports than do people with male bodies who want to wear skirts and be ballerinas. Regardless, it is much harder for transgender boys to find themselves in the available literature. Thankfully, there is the profound *When Aidan Became a Brother*, recent winner of the Stonewall Award (Lukoff & Juanita, 2019). *When Aidan Became a Brother* is revolutionary in that it addresses in no uncertain terms how convoluted the concept of gender can be. It tells the story of a transgender boy and his anger and distress at being misgendered as a girl. When he

learns that his mother is pregnant, he attempts to make the world a safer, more gender-inclusive space for his sibling-to-be. It is an excellent follow-up to *It Feels Good to Be Yourself!* as a means of examining the ways in which Western society maps the gender binary onto children before they are even born.

*When Aidan Became a Brother* invites conversation about the freedom of gender expansiveness, but when I attempted to find books that explicitly address a non-binary lived experience, I came up short. I found very few children's or middle-grade books with a non-binary protagonist. One of the few I found is Thom, Li, & Ching's (2017) *From The Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*.

The protagonist Miu Lan was born when both the sun and the moon were in the sky, so they are neither a boy nor a girl. They can change their shape at will, occasionally sprouting a tail, fins, wings, and thinking nothing of it until they attend school and are mocked by their classmates. Although this book contains fantasy elements and reads, in some ways, like a folktale, it is unique in its depiction of the anxiety, fear, frustration, and occasional pockets of joy that characterize the non-binary and gender-expansive experience. I saw the confusion of my childhood reflected in the pages of this book and imagine that it will inspire cisgender children to adopt a more empathetic stance toward their gender-expansive peers.

Not every teacher has the time in their calendar to add in a six-week study of the gender spectrum and gender expansiveness. But I hope that reading about the work I have undertaken inspires educators to teach explicitly about gender identity in all of its nuance and messiness. As long as our society is steeped as it is in the gender binary, we will need to teach children that language matters and that it is ever-changing. We can provide some vocabulary as a means of anchoring discussions while acknowledging that putting labels on other people is not the purpose of learning vocabulary.

Sharing and making available books about a wide spectrum of gender identities and expressions is an essential step in normalizing gender expansiveness. I hope that by reading about the trends that characterize children's literature concerning transgender and gender nonconforming identity, teachers feel better equipped to evaluate and choose a range of books to facilitate discussion on these issues. The earlier we move away from the reactive, one-off approach that treats LGBTQ+ topics as issues to be solved, towards a preventative approach that normalizes the existence of all gender identities and expressions, the more harm we can prevent and the closer we will come to making our schools truly safe for transgender and gender nonconforming youth.

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## About the Author



**Shelby Brody (they/them)** is an upper elementary school educator and literacy specialist. They are a recent graduate of the Reading & Literacy program at Bank Street Graduate School of Education and currently teach grade 5 Humanities at Bank Street School for Children.

# What Do You Do When You Don't Know How to Respond? Supporting Pre-Service Teachers to Use Picture Books to Facilitate Difficult Conversations

Kathryn Struthers Ahmed and Nida Ali

## A Pre-Service Teacher's Fourth-Grade Classroom

Nida Ali,<sup>1</sup> a pre-service graduate student doing her twice-weekly field placement in a fourth-grade classroom, had just put up a decorated slide with one of her favorite Malcolm X quotes: "Don't be in a hurry to condemn because he doesn't do what you do or think as you think or as fast. There was a time when you didn't know what you know today." She was hoping to discuss his words and how they could be applied to students' lives, particularly because the fourth graders in this "gifted and talented" class expressed negative sentiments toward students who were not as academically advanced as they were.

As soon as she projected the slide, before she could even begin the lesson, a student called out, "Malcolm X was a racist and a murderer!"

Nida was not prepared to be challenged with negative comments about her favorite historical figure. For someone who reads Malcolm X's autobiography two times a year, this was a punch to the gut, and she had no idea how to respond. Pivoting to sidestep her uncertainty and discomfort, she avoided discussing Malcolm X, saying, "Let's ignore who said the quote and just discuss what it means." Students began coming up with interpretations of the quote, such as, "Not everyone is as smart as you," and "Not everyone knows as much as you do," and then, finally, "Some people may not know as much as you do but it is important to remember that we didn't always know the things we know now."

Reflecting on the unnerving reaction to her carefully planned lesson, Nida regretted not taking time to address her students' misconceptions about Malcolm X and his role in history. She was too afraid of being placed in an awkward position, and she imagined having to answer to angry parents who wanted their children to have a curated, "safe" understanding of American history and may not have wanted their children exposed to more radical philosophies.

At the time of this incident, Nida was a student in Kathryn Struthers Ahmed's graduate-level Beginning Elementary Literacy Methods course for pre-service teachers. When Nida described what had happened, Kathryn responded by recommending a picture book to help Nida engage with her students around Malcolm X, his life, and his legacy. Kathryn suggested reading *Malcolm Little: The Boy Who Grew Up to Become Malcolm X* (Shabazz, 2013). It was not until she read the call for papers for this issue of Bank Street's *Occasional Papers Series* that she followed up with Nida about whether she had read the book and discussed Malcolm X further with her fourth graders, and began to reflect on how inadequate her response had been.

## A Teacher Educator's Literacy Methods Course

The following semester, a similar scene occurred, this time in Kathryn's Advanced Elementary Literacy Methods course, where Nida was once again a student. In this course, which focused on disciplinary literacy, Kathryn read aloud a picture book in class each week. In addition to books with characters from a diverse range of backgrounds, many books were centered on historical and contemporary issues of social justice.

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1 Nida Ali was a student in Kathryn Struthers Ahmed's consecutive, semester-long graduate literacy methods courses. At the time of writing this article, Ms. Ali was a graduate student but no longer in Dr. Ahmed's courses.

For example, Kathryn read *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993), about life in Japanese internment camps during World War II, and *I Am Not a Number* (Dupuis & Kacer, 2016), the story of Dupuis's grandmother's traumatic experience in a residential boarding school for Native youth. Pre-service teachers generally responded positively to these books, engaging in discussions about how the texts could be used for multiple purposes, such as teaching often overlooked social studies content, teaching from a social justice stance, and teaching reading comprehension strategies and literary devices.

Kathryn was therefore surprised by some pre-service teachers' reactions to *Pride: Harvey Milk and the Story of the Rainbow Flag* (Sanders, 2018). The book talks about Harvey Milk and the gay rights movement of the 1970s, ending with a stunning illustration of the White House lit up in rainbow flag colors the day in June 2015 when same-sex marriage was federally legalized. Kathryn had prepared for a discussion about the interdisciplinary potential of the book across grade levels. She began by posing the following question: How might you use this text within a larger, interdisciplinary literacy and social studies unit?

When Kathryn finished the read aloud, the pre-service teachers ignored her question and instead began voicing concerns about reading this book with elementary students. One shared that she could not imagine reading this book "where I grew up," while another commented that she would "never" read this book in the (private, religious) schools where she had previously worked. Others nodded in agreement. Kathryn was taken aback by these comments, especially given the students' general openness to addressing other, arguably "heavier," historical topics.

Kathryn remembers stumbling over her words and saying something to the effect of, "Well, this is a law... It's telling the story of how a current law came into being... It's a story about a minoritized group's fight for civil rights." One pre-service teacher countered: "Well, yes, but the book definitely has a perspective" on the law, noting that it was not a "neutral" depiction of the struggle for LGBTQ rights. Kathryn was caught off-guard by this pushback and while she cannot remember more of what was said, she did not facilitate a substantive discussion.

She left the class feeling rattled and concerned about LGBTQ-identified pre-service teachers and how they might feel about their classmates' resistance to celebrating the LGBTQ fight for equality; she was also thinking about elementary students with two moms or two dads. Kathryn felt it was important to take a stand for the minoritized group; she was unwilling to tell her students they did not have to read this book—and by extension, books about topics that might make them uncomfortable or bring up difficult conversations. At the same time, she did not want to dismiss some of the pre-service teachers' concerns. Even though Kathryn disagreed with the thinking behind their resistance, the concerns were very real for the students who raised them. Clearly, her modeling for pre-service teachers about how to facilitate difficult conversations using children's literature did not go well.

## **Background**

These incidents reflect two of the many times we have encountered moments of uncertainty in our teaching. Indeed, teaching has long been characterized as educators needing to wrestle with a variety of dilemmas or tensions (Ben-Peretz & Flores, 2018; Lampert, 1985; Stillman, 2011; Windschitl, 2002). Importantly, dilemmas in teaching are not necessarily negative; in fact, grappling with tensions can be "productive" and generative of new learning—and even improved teaching—under certain circumstances (Stillman, 2011). In our cases, we faced dilemmas around how to respond to students' comments. Nida felt tensions related to the relative lack of power she had as an intern and between her own viewpoints and her uncertainty around

how families' perspectives might differ from her own. Kathryn felt tensions around how to stand with a minoritized group while not dismissing pre-service teachers' concerns and religious beliefs. Neither of us effectively managed these tensions or effectively facilitated difficult conversations.

Children's literature is often used as a tool to approach potentially difficult conversations and "controversial" topics as well as teaching for equity and social justice in elementary classrooms (Dever, Sorenson, & Brodnick, 2005; Fain, 2008; Hartman, 2018; Husband, 2019; Kesler, Mills, & Reilly, 2020; Souto-Manning, 2009). In this paper, we place "controversial" in quotation marks to highlight the subjective and personal nature of the content we're discussing. There are fewer examples of how children's literature is used in teacher education to support pre-service teachers' learning, however (Daly & Blakeney-William, 2015; Johnston & Bainbridge, 2013; Landa & Stephens, 2017). We therefore share our experiences and use them as jumping off points to consider how we might have done a better job leveraging these incidents to facilitate pre-service teachers' learning around using children's literature—and picture books, specifically—to engage students in difficult conversations around "controversial" topics.

### **Leveraging Moments of Unpreparedness as Learning Opportunities**

There are many similarities between our classroom experiences. We were both surprised by students' comments—and therefore felt unprepared to address them. Additionally, we both had plans to dive into a different discussion, and in sticking to our plans, we bypassed students' concerns. Lastly, we both regretted how we handled the interactions. While it is impossible never to feel caught off guard while teaching, we could have better prepared ourselves for potential comments and discussions. Both of these classroom encounters could have been leveraged to facilitate pre-service teachers' learning around engaging children and youth in difficult conversations, using picture books as tools.

### ***Returning to Malcolm X***

When Nida described her fourth grader's reaction to seeing the Malcolm X quote, Kathryn's suggestion of a picture book fell far short of supporting Nida and her peers to engage in difficult conversations with elementary students. At the time when Nida shared the anecdote, Kathryn could have spent more time engaging the pre-service teachers in her class to explore Nida's experience, supporting Nida's reflection on what had occurred and inviting others to participate in the discussion. Thoughtful questions—for individual writing/thinking, for pair or small-group discussion, and/or for whole-class discussion—likely would have served to support their reflections. Kathryn might have asked, "On what do you think the student who made the comment (about Malcolm X being a racist and a murderer) is basing this claim?" This might have helped the pre-service teachers to consider the narrative this child, and possibly other children, had heard about Malcolm X, which Nida could acknowledge, build upon, and unpack moving forward.

Another question Kathryn could have posed is straightforward: "How might Nida have responded?" Pre-service teachers' collective brainstorming around possible responses would not only have helped Nida reflect on the situation but could have helped pre-service teachers think about ways to respond in the future when students made unexpected comments. Kathryn could have supported her students to realize the power of asking open-ended questions, such as, "What makes you say that?" to learn more about the student's thinking. It could also have been helpful for pre-service teachers to think about how Nida might have drawn other fourth-grade students' voices into the conversation. Similarly, it would be important to consider how Nida might learn about students' prior knowledge about the Civil Rights Movement and its leaders more generally, which she could build upon moving forward. We think that engaging in this type of collective reflection and re-imagining of Nida's in-the-moment response would have been supportive to her and her classmates, who may well face similar situations in the future.

Another important question to consider: “What could Nida have addressed immediately, and how might she have followed up later?” We think this question would help pre-service teachers understand that they do not need to have a perfectly crafted response to students’ comments right away. In fact, we maintain that taking time to gather resources and prepare thoughtful learning experiences is essential when teachers engage students in difficult conversations.

In thinking further with Nida and her classmates about how Nida might have followed up with her students, we can imagine Kathryn supporting personal reflection by asking, “What do you know about Malcolm X and how do you know what you know?” This two-part question might support some pre-service teachers to consider how little they know about Malcolm X and how that might affect their teaching choices, while prompting others to reflect on how they learned about a historical figure who receives minimal focus in school curriculum. Following this question, we could ask, “What do you think is important for students to know about Malcolm X and why?” A discussion around this question might prompt disagreements, offering pre-service teachers the opportunity to experience engaging in a potentially “controversial” topic with peers.

Kathryn could have facilitated collaborative brainstorming to think about how Nida might reintroduce the topic in future lessons and class discussions. Kathryn could have moved beyond merely mentioning one picture book. Kathryn could have brought two picture books into class: *Malcolm Little: The Boy Who Would Grow Up to Become Malcolm X* (Shabazz, 2013) and *Malcolm X, A Fire Burning Brightly* (Myers, 2000). She could have facilitated small-group discussions around how to use these books (among other sources) to engage students in conversations around Malcolm X’s life and legacy.

*Malcolm Little* tells the story of Malcolm X’s childhood, focusing on the values his parents instilled in him, especially love and equality. For students who may have heard only negative depictions of Malcolm X, this book could help humanize him. They could perhaps see similarities in his parents’ love for him and in their grown-ups’ love for them; perhaps they could empathize with some of the hardships Malcolm X faced as a child. Pre-service teachers could have collaboratively brainstormed discussion questions—and considered potential responses—to engage students with the text.

*Malcolm X, a Fire Burning Brightly* almost picks up where *Malcolm Little* leaves off, focusing on the ups and downs of his adult life. Parts of this book could be used to directly address Nida’s student’s comment, as it mentions how Malcolm X was “labeled a bigot” for saying that “black people should separate from whites” (Myers, 2000) before changing his mind after converting to Islam. Pre-service teachers could think together about how they might support students to consider the reasons behind Malcolm X’s differing positions.

The books also support the opportunity for students to express differing opinions in a way that maintains their dignity. Importantly, neither book shies away from the hard times in Malcolm X’s life, such as his childhood home being burned down, his father being killed by the Ku Klux Klan, and Malcolm X’s gang involvement, which led to his imprisonment. Thus, these texts can be used to facilitate classroom discussions around the complexities of Malcolm X’s life and, by extension, other lives. The books support, for example, discussion of complex questions such as:

- How do life experiences shape a person?
- Where did Malcolm X stand on the question of whether it is ever okay/necessary to use violence when fighting for major social change, and why? Where do you stand on that question, and why?
- Is it ever okay/worthwhile to separate people based on race (or another demographic category)? Why or why not?

By having pre-service teachers engage with one another around these texts, generate discussion questions, consider possible student comments, and brainstorm potential teacher responses, they would be able to prepare for how they might use picture books as tools to facilitate difficult conversations in their future classrooms.

### **Returning to *Pride***

There were also many missed opportunities from not following up on Kathryn's reading of *Pride* in the literacy methods course. Specifically, there are three spaces in which Kathryn could have improved this conversation, thereby supporting pre-service teachers to use literature to engage in similar conversations with their future students: before, during, and after reading.

Before reading this text, Kathryn might have done more concerted thinking. It would have been helpful to think about pre-service teachers' potential discomfort with the text's content (e.g., considered how some religions view same-sex marriage). Kathryn could also have reflected on her own biases, recognizing that just because she does not find something "controversial" does not mean it is not "controversial" to others. Similarly, she could have considered the assumptions she was making; specifically, living in New York City, she assumed that nearly everyone has progressive values. She could have spent time preparing how to respond to her students' concerns, anticipating potential resistance, and crafting follow-up questions. Thinking about these aspects before reading the book in class would have helped Kathryn be more prepared for students' comments.

During reading and in the initial subsequent conversation, we can imagine ways Kathryn might have better facilitated a discussion with pre-service teachers. Instead of jumping into talking about interdisciplinarity, she could have posed additional questions to accompany the text, such as:

- Would you read this book with students—why or why not?
- For which students might this text be an important "mirror," one that reflects their lived experiences? For which students might this text be an important "window" or "sliding glass door" (Bishop, 1990) into a world that is different from their own?
- How can literature be used to teach about recent/current events?
- What might you do if you (personally, culturally, religiously, politically) disagree with a current law, policy, and/or practice that comes up in your classroom?

Discussing and debating these questions with peers could provide another opportunity for pre-service teachers to practice engaging in difficult conversations themselves, which ideally would support them to feel more comfortable facilitating similar conversations with children.

We think Kathryn should have taken a stronger stance toward including this LGBTQ text in the classroom and at the same time, should have been less dismissive of pre-service teachers' concerns. This is a tricky balance to accomplish. One way she could have done this would have been by posing open-ended questions to pre-service teachers who voiced resistance to learn more about their perspectives, potentially leading to problem-solving around how to approach their resistance. For instance, she might approach pre-service teachers who were worried about parents' reactions differently from pre-service teachers who were personally against gay marriage. Kathryn also could have opened the discussion to the whole class by asking, "What do others think?" It would have been beneficial to give her students an opportunity to write, talk with a partner, and talk in small groups to facilitate broader (and lower-risk) participation.



After reading and the initial discussion, Kathryn might have expanded pre-service teachers' learning in several ways. She could have brought in additional LGBTQ-focused children's literature for reading and small group discussion. Two suggestions are *Sewing the Rainbow: The Story of Gilbert Baker and the Rainbow Flag* (Pitman, 2018) and *Stonewall: A Building, an Uprising, a Revolution* (Sanders, 2019). She could have modeled how narrative nonfiction picture books like *Pride* might be used in conjunction with primary sources, such as newspaper articles and court decisions. It would have been beneficial for her students if Kathryn had made her own reflections transparent, acknowledging that she felt she did not handle the discussion well. This would open up a conversation about how the students experienced the discussion and how it affected their thinking about working with "controversial" materials, as well as inviting reflection on how she might have done things differently. By more intentionally planning for before, during, and after reading interactions, pre-service teachers would have seen a stronger model for how to approach difficult topics and been better prepared to enact this kind of work themselves.

### **Pre-Service Teacher Learning Through Reimagined Experiences**

We hope that pre-service teachers would come away from our experiences bringing up Malcolm X and Harvey Milk in our classrooms with an understanding that teachers sometimes feel surprised and caught off guard by students' comments and/or questions—and that's okay! It is also okay for a teacher to return to a particular issue, comment, or topic once they have had the opportunity to think about it more thoroughly, gather resources, and prepare discussion questions.

We hope that by deliberately discussing the challenges that can arise when teachers take on "controversial" topics, they will be better prepared to make a commitment to not shy away from these topics. This is important because kids hear about and experience difficult issues in their daily lives; avoiding them—especially when children bring them up—diminishes their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Avoiding these topics also serves to reify single, normalized narratives about whose lives and concerns matter. Facilitating students' deepened understanding, through children's literature and class discussions within a supportive community, can serve to validate students' experiences, alleviate their fears, and support them to consider multiple perspectives. As such, we hope that directly addressing "controversial" topics will expand pre-service teachers' sense of responsibility to create a more welcoming classroom community, not only for minoritized youth to feel included but also for youth from dominant backgrounds to recognize their privilege and the potential limitations of their views.

We also want pre-service teachers to reflect on the concept of "controversial" itself. Clearly, what one person finds "controversial," another person might not. Indeed, it was differing perspectives on what is "controversial" that caused us to feel unprepared for our students' challenges—and what caused our students to challenge us when, from their perspectives, we asked them to learn from "a murderer" and read about people whose sexuality contradicts their beliefs. Accordingly, it is important for teachers to recognize and be sensitive to the diversity of opinions, perspectives, and experiences within the classroom community. Beginning with self-reflection can be helpful, as teachers need to be aware of their own biases (Zeichner & Liston, 2014).

Therefore, pre-service teachers need to engage in critical reflections around some tough questions. They might consider, "How might my (implicit) biases and/or beliefs contribute to inequity and/or silencing in the classroom? And, what can I do about it?" For example, if a pre-service teacher's religion condemns homosexuality and esteems heterosexual marriage, they might not be aware that every time they discuss families, they speak in ways that normalize two-parent, heterosexual homes. This silences the experiences

of children who have other family configurations. Even if all of their students live with a married mom and dad, it is important for children to learn that many different types of families exist and all are bound together by love. In this case, a pre-service teacher can intentionally search for books that include representations of diverse families and can work to change their heteronormative language, such as by saying “grown-ups” instead of “mom and dad.”

Self-reflections of this nature can be challenging, so the instructor should expect some pushback. Indeed, in the above example, it is possible that a pre-service teacher might believe strongly that other forms of family structures are sinful. In instances such as these, we maintain that, ultimately, the instructor must take the side of inclusivity and, as the person with power in the classroom, must speak up for the minoritized (in this case, the LGBTQ community). Even if a pre-service teacher does not believe in family structures outside of two married, opposite-sex parents, they exist, and it would be a disservice to all children to not include them in the classroom. Ultimately, as educators, we must place student learning and well-being at the center of our work, even if it makes us uncomfortable or goes against our personal beliefs; this is important for pre-service teachers to understand. Instructors can treat pre-service teachers with dignity—such as by asking open-ended questions, using a respectful tone, and listening authentically to their concerns—while still insisting that they create an inclusive and welcoming classroom.

Finally, we want pre-service teachers to consider children’s literature as an effective and powerful tool for facilitating difficult conversations around a range of contemporary and historical issues. Children’s literature can provide an anchor for discussion and can introduce students to new content and/or multiple perspectives. The language in the text(s) might help teachers think about their framing of “controversial” topics. We would hope that these ideas, taken together, would support pre-service teachers to approach difficult conversations with intention.

### **Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Engage in Difficult Conversations**

In order for pre-service teachers to be prepared to have difficult conversations about “controversial” topics with their students, they need to practice doing so during pre-service preparation. Though teaching will always involve moments of unpreparedness, we suggest that the following assignments, which purposefully involve “controversial” topics and using children’s literature to address them, have the potential to further support pre-service teachers’ learning.

#### ***Interdisciplinary Unit Plan Addressing a “Controversial” Topic***

In light of our experiences we propose redesigning the final project in Kathryn’s Advanced Elementary Literacy Methods course: an interdisciplinary literacy and social studies unit plan. The current assignment includes writing an introductory rationale, creating a unit outline, selecting three or four mentor texts to be used throughout the unit, designing two detailed lesson plans based on the texts, teaching one of the lessons in pre-service teachers’ fieldwork placements, and reflecting on the lesson. We propose revisions to each aspect of the assignment that we believe will support pre-service teachers to grapple with the inherent dilemmas involved in using children’s literature to address “controversial” topics.

First, we would challenge pre-service teachers to intentionally select a topic that makes them—or could make them—uncomfortable if/when it comes up in the classroom. We would ask them to consider topics that either have been brought up by students, have arisen in the books we have read together, or that they could imagine being relevant for elementary students due to current events or their knowledge of children’s lives. For example, the murder of Black people by police officers would be a difficult topic to address, yet

one that students have likely been exposed to due to its alarming prevalence and the dramatic rise in prominence of the Black Lives Matters movement in the summer of 2020.

An important caveat, however, is that pre-service teachers should not feel compelled to select a topic that has the potential to elicit comments that could be hurtful and/or damaging to them. For example, if a pre-service teacher is an undocumented immigrant, discussing the Trump administration's treatment of migrants at the border might be a topic the pre-service teacher has good reason to avoid, in the interest of self-preservation within a potentially hostile climate. The course instructor would need to ensure this message is clearly communicated, as there could be a fine line between a difficult topic and a harmful one.

The assignment would require an introductory rationale and a personal reflection about why this topic makes them uncomfortable and their experience designing a unit around their topic. Additionally, we would ask them to consider mentor texts that present different perspectives on the topic to support students to see multiple sides of an issue. Again, this would depend on the topic, because some issues do not lend themselves to equal presentation of multiple sides. It is particularly important to foreground minoritized voices, such as immigrants, LGBTQ individuals, and Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color because we do not want to give equal weight to the oppressor's perspectives.

The instructor would want to lead the discussions regarding whether and how to address multiple sides of an issue. We maintain that it is the responsibility of the instructor to speak up for minoritized groups and ensure their voices are represented in these text collections. Especially in cases where one side on an issue espouses homophobic, racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and/or other hateful views, the instructor can support pre-service teachers to realize that the "sides" do not need to be presented "equally," just as it is okay for a teacher to condemn historical atrocities such as enslavement and the Holocaust. We recognize that a particular topic might be uncomfortable for a pre-service teacher precisely because they find the other perspective antithetical to their worldview; it might be why they selected the topic. Here, we suggest working closely with individual preservice teachers to consider how—or if—the other "side" might be presented to students, erring on the side of inclusivity and respect for differences, as long as differing opinions are not grounded in another group's oppression.

We would also revise the reflection questions pre-service teachers consider after teaching one of their planned lessons. These questions would focus on the class discussions, how students engaged in the material, what they might have done differently to deepen students' thinking around their difficult issue, how their own discomfort manifested in the classroom, and so on. We would keep questions around what changes pre-service teachers would make to their instruction the next time to better support student learning and engagement.

Lastly, we would want to ensure that instructors utilizing this assignment devote considerable class time to discussing and workshopping it in class. We imagine that throughout the process of developing this unit, pre-service teachers would need time to grapple with their selected topic, especially given that they would have identified the topic as one that makes them uncomfortable. Within a supportive community, pre-service teachers would need to be given time to talk in small groups and reflect on their experiences.

## Literacy in the Community

Another assignment in Kathryn's course, called "Literacy in the Community," could be revised to work especially well to support pre-service teachers in wrestling with the tensions involved with addressing potentially difficult or "controversial" topics in the classroom. This assignment follows reading Lyman (2012), McNamara and Andes (2016), and Orellana and Hernández (1999), all of whom provide examples of taking students out into the world to engage in community- and place-based education. The project then involves pre-service teachers in planning a local field trip that highlights the daily literacies in students' communities.

Revisions could be made to more explicitly support pre-service teachers to engage students in difficult conversations to bring children's literature together with the world around them. For example, the assignment could focus on an issue that is either currently or has historically been important and "controversial" in the school's community. The revised assignment would include pre- and post-field trip work that purposefully includes children's literature addressing the issue.

Nida, in fact, did this, using the assignment as an opportunity to further explore how she might have supported her students' learning about Malcolm X. She designed these learning experiences the semester following the incident where her student called Malcolm X a "murderer." The assignment served as a "thought experiment" about what Nida wished she could have been done or what she might do in the future. Nida's placement school was located near Lenox Avenue, also known as Malcolm X Boulevard, in New York's Harlem, a neighborhood with a long history as a hub of cultural, literary, and intellectual movements. Thus, her project morphed into a community walk along Malcolm X Boulevard, including visits to famed sites related to Malcolm X's legacy.

Nida planned for students to walk from the Tito Puente Statue to Marcus Garvey Park on Malcolm X Boulevard and 120th Street. Students would tour the Malcolm Shabazz Mosque on 116th Street and the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood on 112th Street and walk through the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market. She planned for the community walk to be preceded by a week of exposure to various texts, including picture books, photographs, and videos of speeches relating to Malcolm X and the Civil Rights Movement roots in Harlem.

Nida's project emphasized how texts can be utilized effectively when students are able to connect what they read to their lives and community. One aspect of her assignment, for example, involved reading aloud *Malcom Little* (Shabazz, 2013) and having students "write about life lessons they have learned from their parents, guardians, or anyone that has inspired them... support[ing] [students'] literacy development and reinforc[ing] their connection with the text."

Nida happened to be teaching in an area that was directly connected to Malcolm X, though this assignment could be expanded to go beyond walking trips from pre-service teachers' schools. They could view exhibits at libraries and museums, visit local landmarks, interview people with relevant experience, and so on. Through planning for different ways of engaging students around a "controversial" issue that is or was important in their community, pre-service teachers ideally would be better prepared to create similar learning experiences that explored the issues surrounding students' potentially challenging comments or questions in their future classrooms.

## Conclusion

As educators committed to equity and social justice, we maintain the importance of tackling potentially difficult and/or “controversial” topics with elementary students. Perhaps the most crucial take-away from these experiences for us has been a renewed resolve to engage with students when they challenge us, not avoid conversations for which we feel unprepared. We commit to responding openly to students when questioned, aiming to learn more about their perspectives. We also commit to taking time to prepare for further discussions, knowing, of course, that we will not (ever) have all of the “answers.” We will turn to the invaluable content created by social-justice focused educational organizations perspective—such as **Rethinking Schools, Teaching for Change, Teaching Tolerance**, and the **Zinn Education Project**—as we gather resources to bring back to our classrooms. We commit to the ongoing work of reflecting on and refining our practice.

We encourage teacher educators to support pre-service teachers to begin thinking about how they might engage students in difficult conversations, whether they are related to what’s happening in children’s lives, current events in the news, and/or historical topics in curricular content. We maintain that using children’s literature in the teacher education classroom, along with thoughtful discussion questions and intentionally crafted course assignments, has the potential to support pre-service teachers to feel comfortable engaging around difficult or “controversial” topics with elementary students.

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## About the Authors



**Kathryn Struthers Ahmed, PhD**, is an assistant professor of childhood literacy education at Hunter College, CUNY. Her research focuses on preparing elementary teachers to teach literacy in culturally responsive ways to students from minoritized groups. She is particularly interested in how teacher education, teacher educators, and education policy shape the development of pre-service teachers' literacy instruction as they prepare to work in urban, high-poverty schools. Formerly, she taught first and fourth grades in the Bronx, New York.



**Nida Ali** is a former graduate of the Hunter College School of Education. She received her degree and certification in childhood education. Currently, she is a high school social studies teacher for AP and Regents preparatory classes. Her goal is to create curricula that is culturally relevant and multicultural, in order to create a classroom that is truly inclusive. She attempts for her students to learn and enjoy history while making connections to current affairs and the society they reside in.

# Choosing Difficult, Choosing Important in Fifth-Grade Read-Aloud

*Chiara Di Lello*

In fifth grade, read-aloud can feel like a luxury, a secret bonus level unlocked any time a task goes faster than expected or students pack up for dismissal with five minutes to spare. In my homeroom, I am a defender of read-aloud for many reasons, but foremost as one part of the school day we unequivocally do together. Recently, I found that read-aloud provided my class of fifth-graders some of the richest opportunities all year to talk honestly and openly about identity, bias, racism, and family. I didn't go looking for a read-aloud on a "difficult" topic. Rather, I chose to center authors and characters of color, specifically Black women and girls, in my choice of read-aloud. The resulting experience, taking place over the course of the spring semester, brought both joy and deep engagement with these important topics to the classroom community.

In this essay, I share my critical reflections and pedagogical choices (some more successful than others) while using a whole-class chapter book read-aloud to engage my students in conversation about complex topics, including racism and gender, which we might not have discussed otherwise. It is my hope to model one small way I as a White teacher have tried to disrupt Whiteness in my classroom as part of a larger commitment to anti-racist teaching, and help teachers feel more prepared to undertake similar work in their own settings.

Too often, teachers say "difficult" when we mean "uncomfortable," or more specifically, "uncomfortable for me." This comfort or discomfort is directly tied to privilege. As a White woman teacher, I benefit from White privilege daily, including the privilege of Whiteness being the cultural default in so many spaces, including my own school. Personally and professionally, I have the privilege of being able to choose when I engage with that "difficulty" by broaching the topic of race.

To work against the grain of that privilege and White-as-default, I made a commitment before beginning my first head teaching job to center books in my classroom that featured children of color, written by authors of color. This commitment was based on a variety of factors, one being the desire to teach an inclusive, multicultural curriculum where the experiences of people of color are not limited to "heroes and holidays" (see Banks 1993, among others). Another factor was and is the overwhelming Whiteness of publishing for children.

In 2018, statistics compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison showed that just 10 percent of American children's books featured African American characters, compared to 50 percent featuring White children and 27 percent animal or personified object characters (Huyck and Dahlen, 2019). While that represents a slight increase for books featuring African American characters (up from 7.3 percent in 2014), numbers for Latinx and particularly First Nations characters have barely budged. In fact, most of the decrease in the share of White characters (from 73.3 percent in 2014 to 50 percent in 2018) has been taken up by animal/object characters, which increased by 15 percent between 2014 and 2018. Unfortunately, this problem is not new: calls to diversify the racial makeup of characters and authors in the field have been ongoing for decades (Welch 2016, p.368). It takes active, constant work to make headway against this kind of inequitable representation—which I learned, at first, by failing to do that work.



## Going with the Flow

In the fall of 2018, diving into a new grade at a new school, I took every toehold of structure or familiarity I could get. When it came time to choose a read-aloud for my fifth-grade homeroom, I literally went by the book: my edition of *The First Six Weeks of School* (Anderson, 2015) suggested *The Mysterious Benedict Society* (Stewart, 2007) as a whole-class read-aloud for fifth or sixth grade. I had read the book several years earlier in my class of fourth graders and enjoyed the moments of grownup-level wordplay throughout the story. The story had action, humor, and suspense. It was a known quantity. I'll take it, I thought, not knowing that it would be the seed of the following semester's read-aloud adventure.

In going by the book, I ignored the commitment I had made the year before, and Whiteness-as-default promptly fell into place. It is not surprising that a book recommendation from a company as mainstream as Responsive Classroom would reflect the overwhelming Whiteness of children's and young adult literature. *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, written by a White man, centers on a White boy and his mostly White group of friends and mentors. As Beverly Daniel Tatum writes, "Because racism is so ingrained in the fabric of American institutions, it is easily self-perpetuating. All that is required to maintain it is business as usual" (1997, p.11). As a White teacher that semester, "business as usual" included me.

All in all, the fifth-graders and I enjoyed our run with *The Mysterious Benedict Society*. We finished it in a marathon read-aloud the day before winter break. The class humored me and my silly character voices, thrilled over the various cliffhangers, and cheered when Reynie and his fellow kid-spies triumphed over the evil Dr. Curtain. We even had some good conversations about friendship, doing the right thing, and how authors weave themes into literature. Was it enjoyable? For sure. Was it a source of deep conversations? Not exactly. A nagging sense of curricular regret followed me throughout the semester. Even before the book was done, I had promised myself to make good on my commitment—I knew my class better, the curriculum was humming along. It was time to take more of a risk.

## Choosing the "Tricky" Side of History

As a second semester read-aloud, I chose *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia. Published in 2010, it was a National Book Award finalist and went on to win a Coretta Scott King Award and Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. Those metallic stickers were one form of vetting, a way to know that the book had institutional approval as a work of literature, a representation of African American experience, and a work of historical fiction. It centered Black characters, and specifically Black girls. The three main characters – Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern—travel cross-country from Brooklyn to spend a summer with their estranged mother, Cecile.

The book caught my interest in another way: the "summer" of the title was 1968 in Oakland, California. The Black Panther Party featured prominently. I knew this was not history my students were learning about in social studies or as part of occasion-specific lessons, such as during Black History Month or the lead-up to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Many educators are likely familiar with the ways in which Civil Rights history is watered down and downright distorted in elementary school, leading to student misconceptions along the lines of "Dr. King solved racism," "Rosa Parks was tired," and the misleading idea that it is exceptional individuals, not coalitions, that drive social change (see Kohl, 2007). In this paradigm, Dr. King is quoted for his message of love, nonviolence, and tolerance, but never for his anti-war sentiments or critiques of class. No

mention of his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” or his assertion that “a riot is the language of the unheard” (CBS News, 2017).

No wonder, then, that the Black Panthers don’t make it into most elementary lesson plans. And a strong bias remains against the Panthers for their unapologetic platform and the perceived “hateful” or “violent” aspects of their activism, such as the perception that members were anti-cop or hated White people. I knew that *One Crazy Summer* would provide a different angle, focusing on the social programs the Black Panthers led that made a difference for kids, families, and communities, and a perspective that would put the stereotypes in enough context to understand the group with greater nuance. I looked forward to the chance not just to teach a less familiar part of Civil Rights history, but to make it come to life through the eyes of a character my students’ own age.

When I call the choice of *One Crazy Summer* a risk, it might be better to characterize it as a book that called for greater responsibility on my part. First, I knew it would come with the responsibility to provide context for the genre and the history being told, and help my class of mostly White students make sense of the historical and fictional parts of the narrative. I also had to be prepared to teach a book that did not mirror my own White identity, in front of a class with Black, multiracial, and Asian students, but with a White majority. Like difficulty, risk is in the eye of the beholder, and my sense of risk was undeniably linked to my privilege. I did my best to begin our second semester read-aloud with these responsibilities in mind.

### **Pictures Worth the Words**

It started with a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge. *One Crazy Summer* opens as Delphine and her sisters finally descend into San Francisco on their flight from New York City. “Can you picture the view?” I asked my class. When most of them said no, I quickly pulled up an image of the Golden Gate Bridge and dropped it into a PowerPoint slide. “Oh, that looks familiar!” said a few. But as the story goes, if you give a mouse a cookie... In the first few chapters alone, I got almost a dozen more queries:

“Who’s Cassius Clay?”

“Who is Muhammad Ali?”

“What’s an Afro?”

“Who’s Jackie Kennedy?”

“Wait... how is her suitcase *oval*?”

“Who is Mata Hari?”

“Can you show us a picture?”

Image search after image search, the photos built up—mostly black and white, and in color when I could find them. Some searches were completed during the lesson itself, on demand, others I had to track down during prep time. Finding an image of Black models in Jackie Kennedy-style outfits took more digging than I expected. We also had to confirm a handful of other facts: Was Martin Luther King, Jr. still alive in 1968? What about Malcolm X? And President Kennedy? In retrospect I’m surprised I didn’t end up making a timeline, too.

The PowerPoint slide filled up, and so did the next one. It started to remind me of the concept boards that costume designers put together to prepare for fabrication, with little snippets of the world of the play collaged together to build up a picture.

Some pictures became conversations in themselves. An image search for Bobby Hutton brings up, front and center, photos of him carrying a shotgun in front of the Oakland police department. The weapon is eye-catching, but so are his thick glasses and earnest expression, and the vulnerability they imply. My students saw the photo and immediately remarked on how young he looked, dismayed to see visual confirmation of what they had just learned in our read-aloud: that just months before the summer in *One Crazy Summer*, this boy had been killed by police while trying to surrender to them. As we talked more about why a 16-year-old was carrying a gun, I shared some background information about the Mulford Act, and connected it to the community patrols mentioned in *One Crazy Summer*. Why, I asked my students, might the Black Panthers feel the need to patrol their own neighborhoods? What was the message behind the Act?

Here, my students' own background knowledge took the lead. They knew about many recent examples of police violence against Black people and communities, including the murders of Tamir Rice (younger still than Bobby Hutton) and Michael Brown by police. I knew they had studied the Great Migration in previous grades, so they understood the impact of systemic racism and inequality on Black people, and that one of the forms that racism took was police brutality. Taken together, they had experiences and schema to understand why Black residents of Oakland might not trust police to keep them safe or even to leave residents alone. Thankfully, my class also knew enough about different forms of social change to put this new information into meaningful context.

### **It Means Putting Your Body on the Line**

At that point, we reached an interesting juncture in the conversation. Yes, police brutality and racism were clearly wrong. Why, one student asked, didn't the Black Panthers or Oakland residents protest peacefully? Why did they choose violence as a way to fight back? This is a go-to response I have heard from students over time, and I always wonder about the factors that lead to it. I believe it is grounded in part in their developmental age: 8- to 10-year-olds are known for their fierce commitment to fairness. Still, I have wondered how other factors, including race and class, play a role.

At a very young age, students with class privilege absorb the idea that money is used to solve social problems—they may suggest a bake sale or other fundraiser, for example, as a way to help underserved communities or combat climate change. I also wonder about the underlying assumptions that White students draw upon when suggesting peaceful protest. While they may not be aware of it, they are picturing a scenario where their protest is noticed, respected, and responded to. They have absorbed the idea that in a society that privileges Whiteness, they will be able to expect redress for their grievances.

Fifth grade is an important developmental cusp because students are more prepared to think abstractly, and to consider questions of representation and power. So when my students questioned the Black Panthers' strategies, I paused, then asked the class if they could think of any other examples of activists who had more and less "extreme" ways of fighting for their cause.

Earlier in the year, we had completed a Language Arts unit about investigating and using primary sources. Students analyzed a set of primary source texts related to the women's suffrage movement in the United States. These included some visual artifacts like photos of the "Silent Sentinels," suffragists who picketed the White House in 1917, and anti-suffrage cartoons whose arguments and sexist humor the class worked together to debunk. My students learned that Alice Paul and some of the other picketers were members

of a more militant group of suffrage leaders—they preferred picketing and civil disobedience to petitions and less disruptive protests. When my students asked what “militant” meant, I said it meant that their methods were extreme, or radical. One thing that made their approach different, I explained, was that they were willing to put their bodies on the line for justice.

With some time to recall this information about Alice Paul and the arrests and hunger strikes endured by the Sentinels and other suffragists, the Black Panthers’ strategies seemed to click for my students. They understood that, bottom line, Dr. King and Malcolm X had similar goals. And they understood how, in oppressive systems, different leaders and groups of people might end up with different ideas of how to fight back. In both discussions, I told them plainly that not everyone agreed with militant tactics and that we might not choose them for ourselves, but it was important to understand them.

### **Pulling a Gendered Plow**

As aptly as my students connected to and analyzed the racial power dynamics in the book, a different attempt to broach a difficult topic from *One Crazy Summer* fell surprisingly flat. Throughout our read-aloud journey, Cecile’s words and actions brought gasps of indignation from my students, who could not understand her coldness toward her own children. It is a testament to Williams-Garcia’s writing that our weighty discussions of civil rights, discrimination, and police brutality did not distract from the emotional core of the book: whether Delphine and her sisters would finally earn the affection of their mother, Cecile.

When the girls arrive in Oakland, they quickly realize that Cecile’s priority is her writing. She gives the girls money for takeout dinners and sends them to the Community Center (run by the Black Panthers) each day so they will have meals and something to do. The rest of the comforting, mediating, and caretaking falls to Delphine, who concludes that her mother can only be called that in the biological sense. Some of the most tender moments in the book are when Delphine’s carefully controlled attitude of responsibility and neutrality starts to crack under her disappointment.

But Cecile is far from a detestable “evil stepmother” stereotype—at least to this adult reader. At a key moment in the book, she obliquely reveals to her daughter why motherhood and homemaking hold so little interest for her. Delphine insists on cooking a meal for her sisters, and Cecile relents at last. Watching Delphine cook, Cecile critiques the level of gendered responsibility Delphine has already taken on at age 11: “We’re trying to break yokes. You’re trying to make one for yourself. If you knew what I know, seen what I’ve seen, you wouldn’t be so quick to pull the plow.”

To me, Cecile’s choice of words was a biting indictment of mothering-work. Had we worked through the metaphor and inferential meanings as a group, I am sure the students would have realized the plainer meaning of Cecile’s words: that she sees mothers, or women more generally, treated like farm animals, and she can’t accept that at the price of her creativity and freedom. I assumed that in Cecile’s remark to her daughter that “it wouldn’t kill you to be selfish,” my students would at least pick up on their differing character traits, and conclude that a healthy balance lay somewhere in the middle.

We didn’t get there. I didn’t understand why. I knew my students cared passionately about gender inequality—many of them connected our primary source work on suffrage to gender inequality as it persists today in things like the gender pay gap. They knew that in the past certain tasks were firmly designated as “women’s work.” But their journal entries about the scene fell flat.

Perhaps I was too indirect. We didn't work through Cecile's metaphor in class, nor did we talk about the state of Black women's rights in 1968 or the early 1960s when Cecile fled her family. Aside from the missing historical context, I wondered afterward what understandings of gender expectations and work my students had or felt prepared to respond to. Most elementary school lessons on jobs (usually part of first- or second-grade curricula) focus on "community helpers," glossing over any critical engagement with who has access to what kinds of work, what kinds of work are valued, and why (see Black, 2016). I wonder how my students would have responded to more direct questioning about Cecile's actions and motivation. I wonder if their perceptions of Cecile changed meaningfully upon finding out that leaving her children was in part about defying others' narrow expectations.

### **"I've Never Had to Think About That"**

One possible reason the conversation about motherhood, work, and gender expectations fell flat is because I failed to use a strategy I had drawn on for other parts of the book: I took myself out of the picture.

It would have been irresponsible to undertake a read-aloud of *One Crazy Summer* if I were not prepared to name my own Whiteness. As a general strategy, I believe that authentic conversations about difficult topics cannot happen when we, as educators, enter the conversation with a contrived neutrality. We are "situated beings" (Silin, 1995), not objective or aloof observers. Acknowledging my identity, and specifically my race, as part of our read-aloud was a key way to enrich discussions and model the thinking I hoped to see from my students.

*One Crazy Summer* is what Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop would call a "window" book for me as a White person, and the same was true for most of my students last year. In her important and influential essay on multicultural literacy, Dr. Bishop characterized books as mirrors or windows—reflecting back the identity of the reader, and/or providing a window into another identity, culture, or perspective (Bishop, 1990). Then as now, "mirror" books for White children abound, while for children of color the harm persists of not seeing their identities reflected in the books they read. This harms White children as well, who develop a distorted sense of their place in the world and may have little firsthand exposure to human experiences across racial differences (Welch, 2016, pp. 372-373). In reading *One Crazy Summer* as a White teacher, I had to be prepared to model the process of learning from, and empathizing with, perspectives and experiences I had not lived.

The commitment to acknowledging my Whiteness was tested early in the book, when Delphine and her sisters are offered money by a White woman at the airport in an awkward, embarrassing scene. "Wow," I said as my students grimaced or gaped in shock. "I get the feeling this is something the White lady thinks is normal and okay to do. As a White person, I'm cringing right now." Students' comments and questions built onto mine: "Was she just not thinking?" "Does she assume they need money?" "Why would she think that?" "This probably wouldn't happen to White children traveling alone."

Another important "window" moment takes place when Delphine's youngest sister Fern is teased by "Crazy" Kelvin for having a White doll, her beloved Miss Patty Cake. The doll is pale pink, blonde, and blue-eyed. Kelvin tells Fern it's wrong for her to be so attached to a White doll. As a class, we stopped and talked about Kelvin's point of view, and several students agreed that he was pointing out a real problem—it wasn't fair that Black girls like Fern couldn't find toys that looked like them (they were quick to point out that this problem can still show up today).

I then added, “As a White person, I haven’t had to think about what Fern is thinking about. Maybe this is true for you too, but I have always had an easy time finding toys that looked like me.” Others replied that, at the same time, Fern associates the doll with her mother, so it’s understandable why she’s so attached to it. In that moment of the read-aloud conversation, multiple points of view came to the surface in empathetic ways. Acknowledging my own race and how it affected my reading of the scene helped normalize the idea that each of us would bring different perspectives to it.

### **Lessons Learned**

While read-aloud was just one part of our busy days last year, I recognize that many factors led to my class’s experience with *One Crazy Summer*. Here are some of my reflections on what helped me and my students explore the topics we did.

**Training makes a difference.** As a White teacher, I have lots of work to do to unpack my own biases. Foundational experiences in my teacher training program helped build the commitment I began this essay with: to center characters and authors of color in my classroom. Some examples: as a graduate student, my history of education instructor chose to include Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville teacher strikes in the syllabus; all students in field work placements participated in discussions about racial identity and teaching; my master’s project focused on culturally responsive teaching and racial equity as part of progressive practice.

Many professional development experiences have helped build my understanding of systemic racism, White identity, and anti-racist teaching practice. These include the teaching and mentorship of faculty from the **Center for Racial Justice in Education (formerly Border Crossers)**, the **People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond**, the **CARLE Institute**, and the **National Diversity Practitioners Institute**. The breadth and depth of these trainings and experiences have helped build my knowledge and skills. Underlying all that, a commitment to teaching the whole child is, bottom line, the best motivation to bring important, difficult, real learning into the classroom.

**Mindset makes a difference.** When engaging critically with race, gender, and other “difficult” topics in the classroom, I know that my learning is never done. I continue to seek out and learn from the perspectives and expertise of Black and Indigenous educators and scholars, and I use social media intentionally to keep up with conversations about race and literacy, diversity in children’s publishing, social justice education, and more. (A non-exhaustive list of the educators and experts I am grateful to learn from is included at the end of this essay.) Knowing that the work is ongoing also helps build my tolerance for uncertainty and mistakes, the “necessary messiness” of critical literacy and anti-racist teaching. I know that I cannot let my apprehension keep me from engaging, because that is the “business as usual” that upholds White supremacy in schools and in society.

**Colleagues make a difference.** Related to training and mindset, the colleagues we listen to and learn from are critical to engaging with “difficult” topics in and through literature. Earlier this year, one educator compiled data on the books teachers were recommending to each other via Facebook groups as middle-grade read-alouds (Twitter, 2020). Nearly all of the top 100 recommendations were by White authors, and many titles were published before 2000 (when I and teachers my age were ourselves in elementary school!). This example reminds me that I have to think carefully and critically about who I’m going to for recommendations. I have to expect that mainstream sources (such as *The First Six Weeks of School* or the uncritical hivemind of social media) will only replicate the dominant and mostly White list.

I am lucky to work with and know several wonderful, committed anti-racist librarians—they are an invaluable resource when choosing read-alouds like *One Crazy Summer*. They are also the reason I know what a Newberry or Coretta Scott King award is, and why it matters. Social media can play an important role here as well, to make sure I am listening to and amplifying colleagues committed to anti-racism, even if we don't work at the same institutions.

**Be ready to bring your real self to it.** If we as educators are feeling the need to bring up “difficult” topics in the classroom, it is because we know that our students are affected by racism, sexism, poverty, violence, mass incarceration, homophobia, transphobia, climate change, and other forms of injustice. Be real about how these affect you, too, at the very least by being ready to share your feelings authentically, and when appropriate, to name the impact on your own identity. Make emotions and empathy part of the learning and healing that can happen when you make space to talk about difficult issues in your classroom.

**Be prepared to do your own homework.** By now, my students' go-to questions are pre-programmed in my brain. I have to expect that they will ask, at least for realistic or historical fiction books, “Is that a real person?” immediately followed by “Are they still alive?” So I may as well check before we open up the book together! Doing my own homework also means filling gaps in my own knowledge about historical context, or maybe getting up-to-date data to put events in the book into context. Maybe it means finding a map, a piece of artwork, or a photograph (or several dozen photographs).

It matters who the kids are. Remembering Dr. Bishop's powerful framework, know when you are providing a mirror or window for the students in your care. To the extent that you can, be prepared for some of their responses and what they reveal about students' subconscious understandings (such as my students' comments about protesting that show internalized assumptions about meritocracy and equality under the law).

### **When Difficult Means Important**

There is a part of me that wondered last year whether *One Crazy Summer* was really that big of a deal to teach, or if my second semester choice made any difference. In the process of writing this essay, I learned that this book was challenged in North Carolina in 2015 along with *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2000). Parents objected to both books, saying they contained “objectionable themes and questionable values” (ABC News, 2015). Perhaps the biggest lesson, then, was that it was possible for my classroom to make normal what was “objectionable and questionable” elsewhere.

I can't know exactly what the impact of *One Crazy Summer* was on my students. Still, I wonder what it will mean for my White students, for example, to have learned about the Black Panthers now rather than as young adults, and to have at least one opportunity to complicate and rethink their perspective of police officers as benevolent “community helpers.” I hope this read-aloud was just one chance of many for my Black students to read a book as a whole class that reflected parts of their identity, and spoke to issues of representation (like Fern's White doll) that they may grapple with themselves.

I do know that by precluding certain topics from the classroom, we cast them as difficult, uncomfortable, undesirable; but by bringing these topics into our classrooms and engaging students in authentic, empathetic discussion about them, we show that they are important. And that makes a statement. That is its own form of radical.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the work and generosity of the following people and groups, who make their literacy, anti-bias/anti-racism, and equity expertise freely available on social media. Thank you for helping me on my journey to practice anti-racism in my teaching, work, and life. The handles are for Twitter, though many of these people are active on other platforms as well:

Melinda D. Anderson (@mdawriter), education journalist and author  
Tricia Ebarvia (@triciaebarvia), teacher and co-founder of #DisruptTexts  
Dulce-Marie Flecha (@dulceflecha), literacy and trauma-informed educator  
Lorena Germán (@nenagerman), educator, writer, co-founder of #DisruptTexts  
Liz Kleinrock (@teachntransform), anti-bias/anti-racism educator  
Tiffany M. Jewell (@tiffanymjewell), anti-racist educator and author  
Jess Lifshitz (@Jess5th), teacher and critical literacy educator  
shea martin (@sheathescholar), educator and researcher  
Dr. Kim Parker (@TchKimPossible), literacy organizer, co-founder of #DisruptTexts  
Dr. Debbie Reese (@debreese), educator and writer, founder of American Indians in Children's Literature (americanindiansinchildrensliterature.net)  
Annie Tan (@AnnieTangent), classroom teacher, activist, writer, and storyteller  
Christina Torres (@biblio\_phile), classroom teacher and writer  
Julia E. Torres (@Juliaerin80), educator, writer, co-founder of #DisruptTexts  
Marcy Webb (@teachermrw), teacher, writer, and facilitator

I have also learned from the following organizations and groups:

Disrupt Texts (@DisruptTexts): A movement to rebuild the literary canon using an anti-bias, anti-racist critical literacy lens. (disrupttexts.org)

We Need Diverse Books (@diversebooks): Aims to put more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children. (diversebooks.org)

Reading While White (@readwhilewhite): White librarians organizing to confront racism in the field of children's and young adult literature. (readingwhilewhite.blogspot.com)

#OwnVoices: A term coined by the writer Corinne Duyvis. It refers to an author from a marginalized or underrepresented group writing about their own experiences from their own perspective, rather than someone from an outside perspective writing as a character from an underrepresented group. (Definition via Seattle Public Library)

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## About the Author



**Chiara Di Lello** is a writer and upper elementary school teacher. She began her teaching career in museum education, where she specialized in creating accessible programs for students with disabilities. That led her to a special education degree, which deepened her commitment to equitable teaching and anti-bias work. It is Chiara's goal to model positive, anti-racist White identity for her students and to teach them to identify and interrupt systems of injustice. As her students know, she loves coffee, reading, and *Star Wars*.

# Shattering, Healing, and Dreaming: Lessons from Middle-Grade Literacies and Lives

Carla España

Listening to these mentors,  
I feel like I can prove the negative stereotypes about girls like me wrong.  
That I can and will do more, be more.  
But when I leave? It happens again. The shattering.  
And this makes me wonder if a black girl's life is only about being stitched together and coming undone, being stitched together and coming undone.  
I wonder if there's ever a way for a girl like me to feel whole.  
Wonder if any of these women can answer that.  
(Watson, 2017, p. 86)

How can schools be a place where make Black and Brown children can feel whole? How can we create learning spaces that honor the humanity of Black and Brown children? In preparation for a summer enrichment program, I sought the wisdom of Black women authors to teach English Language Arts with seventh and eighth graders. Engaging with Renée Watson (2017), Jewell Parker Rhodes (2018), Jacqueline Woodson (2014), and Nikki Grimes (2017) helped ground the conversations in students' lives and in stories and poems crafted by these Black women.

We practiced the skills work of author's craft analysis, including investigating such character and theme development, imagery, point of view, and word choice. This was accompanied by an analysis of identity and a critical approach to texts and our lives, considering issues of power, privilege and oppression, as Gholdy Muhammad (2020) compels us to do in her "Equity Framework" (pp. 12, 57-58). Students discussed how they positioned themselves at that particular moment in time, how they navigated issues at the intersections of race, class, and gender, the role of art in healing, and how power, inequity, and resilience were all present in their lives.

The Gathering Academy (TGA)<sup>1</sup> is an independent, non-sectarian middle school (grades 6 through 8) that provides opportunities for children from low-income families. Students of color comprise 96 percent of the population at TGA. All TGA students receive financial aid. Students commute to their school from all over New York City, including Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, Staten Island, Brooklyn, and the neighboring state of New Jersey. Besides English Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies classes, TGA students participate in electives and extracurricular activities that include drama, art, and piano. All students are expected to participate in some kind of summer enrichment experience, at TGA or outside of TGA. Some students participate in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) summer courses at nearby schools while others attend the Language Arts (LA) and Math summer enrichment courses offered by TGA.

As a teacher educator and former middle-grade teacher at a New York City public school now teaching in the summer TGA program, I shared my own journey, identity development, and my connections with the themes that came up in the lessons. Some of the students' journeys reminded me of my own, taking the 6 train downtown to my middle school, being a first-generation student and processing the pressures and pride that accompanied my studies, especially as a Latina who didn't quite fit in with the narrow definitions or expectations people had of me.

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1 School and student names are all pseudonyms.

I came to the United States as an undocumented immigrant and was labeled an English Language Learner, pulled from my classes for English language support, while also attending Saturday School in Spanish at La Escuela Argentina in Queens, New York. I too felt the pressures to fit in, to make my immigrant parents proud, and to keep an eye out for the company I kept. As my mom would often say, “Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres” (Tell me who your friends are and I’ll tell you who you are).

Although there were commonalities across our experiences, there were several places where I needed to do some deep listening. As a white-presenting Latina, I do not experience the same discrimination that the Black and Brown students shared. Also, I had attended a public middle school and high school, so the world of independent schools was a new one for me. Our class text, *Piecing Me Together* by Renée Watson, was a window into this other kind of schooling, and hearing students’ concerns about how their lives would change if they went to a predominantly white school opened conversations on how racially, ethnically, and linguistically minoritized children navigate such spaces.

The overall goal of the LA programming across seventh and eighth grade was to use texts to support students’ identity development, to engage in author’s craft analysis, and to process issues of injustice in the texts and in our lives. The seventh-grade teacher facilitated the students’ design of protest posters and poems, while in the eighth grade, I facilitated the students’ literary response notebook pages, essays, and poems. We met over four weeks during the summer of 2018 for a total of 15 class sessions, each 80 minutes in length.

I designed the LA curriculum for seventh and eighth grade around the following objectives:

1. Students will develop their reader and writer identities.
2. Students will develop their literary analysis.
3. Students will analyze issues from their lives at the intersection of race, class, and gender through the reading of the novels *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker-Rhodes (2018) (7th grade), *Piecing Me Together* by Renée Watson (2017) (8th grade), poems from *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson (2014) (7th & 8th grade), and poems from *One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance* by Nikki Grimes (2017) (7th and 8th grade).
4. Students will engage in conversations about the class texts and their lives with family and friends.
5. Students will write poems and literary responses to share with their learning community.

My planning was informed by culturally sustaining pedagogies (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2017) and critical bilingual literacies (España & Herrera, 2020). With this approach I sought to center the experiences of the students of color, particularly focusing on writing by Black women. The seventh-grade summer program teacher was a teacher at TGA during the school year and had shared the need for more readings by Black authors and identity development work for my rising eighth-grade students.

### **From Identity Texts to Poetry**

Before unpacking the identity work in our class text, I asked students to share some of the most prominent identity markers in their lives, using identity webs (a way of documenting the ways students’ self-identified, the groups they belong to, and identity markers that others might impose on them). I began working with identity webs over a decade ago when Yvonne de Gaetano, a professor in my teacher education program and now one of my mentors, engaged us pre-service teachers in processing how our identities were interpreted in our schools and communities.

In the TGA program, I shared my own identity web first and talked through two moments that impacted my life and perspective: my journey as an undocumented immigrant, and attending Saturday School in New York City where instruction was in Spanish (see Figure 1). I shared the experience of my mom and I being lost a few weeks after arriving from Chile. We stood crying on Queens Boulevard in New York City, afraid to ask for help, and afraid that we would be separated from my dad again. Around the same time, our neighbor, who I now call tía Isabel because she became family, told us about a Saturday school that was all in Spanish. I told students about walking to La Escuela Argentina, and how much I looked forward to Saturdays, how smart I felt, and how I wished I could feel the same at my elementary school in English Mondays through Fridays.

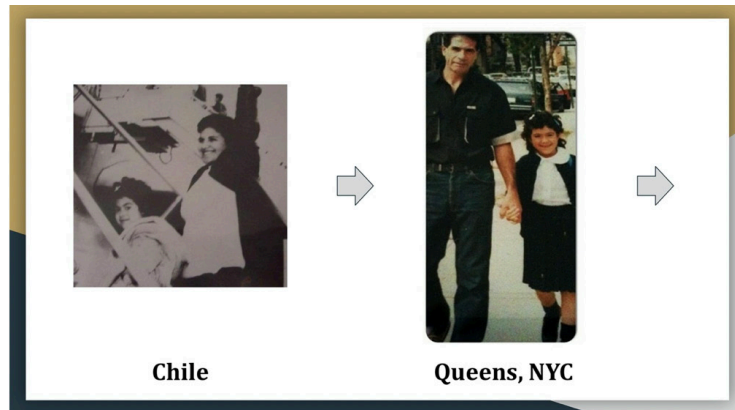


Figure 1. Teacher's Revealing Moments

I connected those two moments to larger social issues that impact many children: immigration policy and bilingual education. It was important to make that connection (and not to remain at the level of identity markers) when creating an identity web. As an immigrant “with documents” and an instructor in a teacher education program in Bilingual Education, I recognize my privilege and find it important to name the systems that oppress and privilege certain groups (Cuauhtin, 2018). These also helped as entry points for discussions on the social issues in our lives and in texts, especially when we considered how we navigate spaces where our full humanity is not welcomed. I followed Sara Ahmed’s recommendation on identity webs to “revisit them as a touchstone text to do the work of social comprehension” (2018, p. 28).

From students’ identity webs I learned about the central role that neighborhoods play in their lives, especially the pride of those who grew up in the Bronx, as expressed in their reading response notebooks and in their “BX” shouts when we shared identity markers. “Lots of people can’t find beauty in my neighborhood, but I can,” says Jade, the protagonist in *Piecing Me Together* (Watson, 2017, p. 10) and this is how the students talked about their communities. It was crucial for me to listen because adults in the book and adults in these children’s lives often think of their homes and neighborhoods from a deficit perspective, and these interpretations reveal how language practices, ways of dressing, and ways of knowing are racialized (Rosa, 2019).

Students’ identity webs showed complexity in self-identifiers and interests. Some highlighted race, ethnicity, nationality and language. Students separated different identifiers with bubbles around “Ecuadorian,” “Mexican,” and “American,” while others put them all together, such as the “Dominican & Salvadoran” bubble in another student’s identity web. “Bilingual,” “trilingual,” and “quadrilingual” came up across webs for these bi/multilingual students, who see their language practices as central to their identities (España & Herrera, 2020).

The students' interests ranged from sports-related (soccer and basketball the most popular) to artist identities, including those who played instruments, sang, and sketched. Some students highlighted aspirational identities, such as "aspiring civil rights activist." These webs were instrumental in setting up the students to think about their identities and how they change over time, especially at crucial moments of pressure and resistance. We compared their experiences to Jade's moments of tension in *Piecing Me Together*, helping us push the identity webs further to consider identities that are privileged compared to those that are oppressed (Cuauhtin, 2018).

We moved from identity webs to poetry as we considered the events that shape our identities and how we respond to such events. We read poems from the Harlem Renaissance and from Nikki Grimes' *One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance* (2017), as well as a selection from Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014). I selected four poems from Woodson's memoir to help us create community and prepare us for our analysis of texts and our lives:

1. "greenville, south carolina, 1963"
2. "the right way to speak"
3. "south carolina at war"
4. "the fabric store"

I used the poems as transitions into discussions of current issues. These ranged from issues happening in the lives of families or friends at the time we were born to issues of racism. Students interviewed family and friends to find out more and chose to write a poem about the events occurring around the time of their own birth, or of that of a family member or friend. It was important to give students these options because not all of them had access to their families.

Students arrived the next day in class excited to share what they had learned from family and/or friends. For many students, interviewing others and using their words to create their poem about a time removed from their present-day was a more accessible entry point to discuss issues such as (im)migration, racism, income inequality, gender discrimination, religious freedom, and what it means to be an American.

Although these seventh and eighth graders had already been together for at least a year in classes at TGA, I was a new instructor on the faculty and it was crucial to create a space where their stories would be welcome. Another space that welcomed the students and their poetry was the I, Too, Arts Collective in Harlem, New York City. Founded by Renée Watson, the author of our class text, I, Too leased Langston Hughes' former Harlem residence from 2016-2019.

In preparation for our visit, we read Hughes' "Mother to Son" (1994) and "Harlem" (1994) poems. Students were already familiar with "Dreams" (1994), which they sing every year for the graduating eighth-grade class.

At Hughes' home, students discussed their own poems in small groups and some read their poems in front of the class. The three students who shared their poems had never shared their poetry before. There were oohs and ahhs, finger snaps, and smiles. In one student's poem, his Black and Latino identity, as well as artistic identity, were all set to a rhythm, which served as a precursor to a culminating performance he'd also give later in our class and larger summer program celebration.

Grimes' *One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance* (2017) offered students three ways of expressing the complexity of lived experiences: poetry from Black poets from the Harlem Renaissance, original poems

written by Nikki Grimes using the golden shovel method, and illustrations. Grimes took words or an entire poem by Black poets from the Harlem Renaissance to develop her own poems. *One Last Word* resonated with several students who had noted “artist” on their identity webs and wanted to experiment with illustrations, sketches, calligraphy, and memes to show their understanding of events in the lives of the characters in *Piecing Me Together* and in their own lives.

### **Reading, Living, and Writing at the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender**

And I realized how different I am from everyone else at St. Francis. Not only because I’m black and almost everyone is white, but because their mothers are the kind of people who hire housekeepers, and my mother is the kind of person who works as one.

(Watson, 2017, p. 5)

They all agree that the next girl is a seven, and just when my order is ready, I hear one of them say, “What about her?” I know he is pointing to me, which means they are all looking at me—from behind. Not good. The man at the counter calls my number and gives me my food. The boys behind me assess me. One of them says, “I give her a five.”

(Watson, 2017, p. 93)

One class set of *Piecing Me Together* was shared across two sections of eighth graders, and it became apparent within the first week that students enjoyed leaving their notes for the other section’s reader or returned to the class over the lunch break to discuss the latest chapter.

I organized the summer program to build from an analysis of our own lives to character analysis with the text, back to reflections on our lives, and then to writing pieces that could be shared. A teacher guide for *Piecing Me Together* (Cappy & O’Brien, 2017) was one of my thought partners. The class sessions were structured to allow for students to read, process their reading in writing and conversation, and for me to share strategies to apply to other texts and situations.

Like Jade and her family, TGA students experience discrimination at the intersection of race, class, and gender, among other forms of difference. Because all the students were receiving financial support to attend TGA, and many would consider the issue of access to future high schools to be a concern, they connected with the instances where Jade experienced inequity in access to resources. For Jade, making collages and taking pictures were ways to process these situations.

Students talked about how they confront challenges in their lives, what kind of support systems they have or that are missing, and how they feel. The challenges they shared in small group discussions ranged from ruptures in relationships at home (e.g., children of divorced parents), to missing extended family (e.g., children with family in other countries), to the racism they experienced in their daily lives while commuting to school, shopping, or just spending time with friends.

Some students identified the ways they deal with stress. Sports were important for some students, but not for others, like the one who wrote “not a sports fan” on his identity web. Several students enjoyed some kind of art form as healing: calligraphy, singing, sketching, and painting. Music and memes also came up and students would share songs and create memes as they went back and forth between difficult moments in the book and in their lives.

As a new staff member, I was struck by how the school community was often referenced as a source of comfort and inspiration. Students mentioned the retreat (an annual overnight event that includes journaling, meditation, and playtime), debate team, music class, art class, and trips as instrumental in helping them process their feelings and nurture their friendships. Some students wrote poems about family members who provide a safe place, their trustworthy siblings or parents, the grandparent who makes them meals, and the extended family they miss who are in another country.

Students returned to key places in the text to understand Jade's life—the importance for her of artistic expression, the tension in friendships across neighborhoods and school settings, and the complex relationships with her family and her mentor. Students lingered on the details of the friendships between Jade and Lee Lee—two Black girls who grew up together but attend very different schools—and Jade and Sam, a white girl. Students compared the education that Jade was receiving in her predominantly white private school with Lee Lee's at her public school, attended mostly by students of color. They noted that Lee Lee's teacher was teaching beyond the textbook and highlighting the role of silenced voices in history. Students discussed the incident where Jade and Sam go shopping and Jade is treated differently from Sam.

Students expressed their rage when the same thing happened to one of their classmates. A group of them had gone shopping and while all of them were looking around, only the Black girl in the group was approached by a salesperson and asked to show the contents of her book bag. The rest of the friends, white and Asian American, were angry and joined the Black girl in asking the salesperson why they weren't suspected of stealing. They were visibly shaken by the incident when they described it in class. The rest of the class asked them how they felt (angry, confused, frustrated) and if they ever returned to the store (they didn't). We spent time discussing:

- How did this experience shape them?
- How did it shape their understanding of how racism works?
- How does it inform our understanding of the fallout in Jade and Sam's friendship?

Jade says "girls like me, with coal skin and hula-hoop hips, whose mommas barely make enough money to keep food in the house, have to take opportunities every chance we get" (Watson, 2017, pp. 6-7). What began as character analysis in the beginning chapters developed into understanding the many themes the book develops across relationships and incidents of racism that strike the heart of a community. "Jade," "Family," "Maxine," "Sam," and "Mentorship," the topics in our first small group meetings, grew into the following lines of inquiry:

- What role does art play in Jade's life?
- How does Jade's relationship with her mentor Maxine change?
- How can Jade be true to herself?
- How does Jade relate to her different family members?

The small group and whole class conversations, along with revisiting our identity webs and poems, helped students grow their ideas and questions (Figures 2, 3, and 4). The more they read and talked, the more they realized that their own lives were also complex and required care and processing.



Figure 2. Small Group Notes

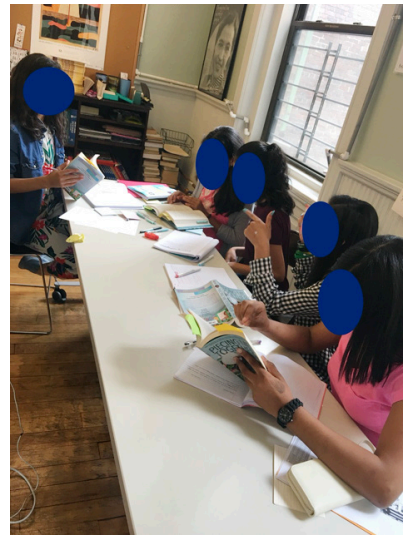


Figure 3. Small Group Conversation

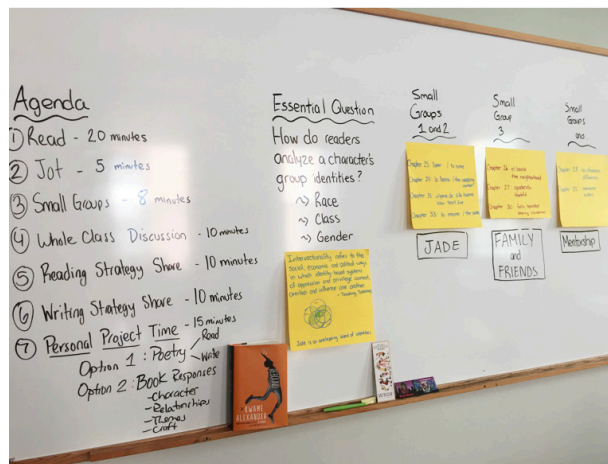


Figure 4. Class Session 6 Agenda and Small Groups

In three small group conversations, students chose to discuss the scene from the second of this section's opening quotes. Jade is in a Dairy Queen and the boys there judge her body, call out to her, and make her feel unsafe, uncomfortable, and sick. Every child in the three groups had some association with this scene, whether it was being the victim of this kind of behavior or a witness to it. "That happens to me on the subway too," commented a student when a classmate shared her frustration and fear. "We should meet up and take the train together," another classmate strategized.

They talked about the safest routes to school, how it would be better to travel as a group, and how to deal with harassment. They returned to the text and began to list Jade's challenges and her strength. These moves from text to life nurtured and reinforced their ability to recognize their inner strength, their friendships, their perceptiveness and resilience.

The quick notes students took in preparation for their conversations in small groups and with the whole class helped set them up for longer and more in-depth writing about their challenges and successes. Students had discussed several themes across three weeks and their notebook pages helped them select one that they most cared about. In *Piecing Me Together* the most common topic selected was "racism" and it was developed into theme statements such as "racism affects Black teens," "racism affects all aspects of your life



as a poor, Black girl” and “the master narrative is not the reality.” These theme statements were explained with examples from the book that included the shopping incident with Jade and Sam; Natasha, a victim of police brutality; and the study-abroad selection process when Jade was not considered for her dream opportunity.

### Dreams on Paper and in Song

We celebrated our work and growth together at our fifteenth session, with the whole school. I had noticed that it was during the breaks between class sessions that students gathered to share their sketch notebooks, dance moves, and songs. I asked if they wanted to include these in our celebration. Students worked on sketches and paintings of the characters from *Piecing Me Together* while a group practiced singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (Johnson, J. W., & Johnson, J. R., 1899). Poems, essays, and art pieces were displayed on one side of the gathering space for the gallery walk part of the program (as seventh graders displayed their work on the other side). While one group sang “Lift Every Voice and Sing” a student (the same student who had shared his poem at the I, Too Arts Collective) delivered a spoken word poem. It was a creative, thoughtful, and powerful blend of *Piecing Me Together*, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, *One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance*, and TGA students’ lives.

Two days prior to this celebration, speaker, author, and lifestyle coach Klay S. Williams visited the class as a guest speaker. Williams walked the students through creating vision boards with images and words that represented what they wanted for their lives in the near future. During this session students shared dreams, songs, and poetry. One student’s vision board had pictures of Janelle Monae and other Black artists, all surrounding a “#ME” in bold, black letters. Other students wrote phrases such as “I am beautiful” and “Tú sabes que puedes llegar bien lejos” (You know you can go far) front and center on their vision boards (Figure 5).



Figure 5. A TGA Student Shares their Vision Board with Guest Speaker Klay S. Williams

## Nurturing My Growth as a Teacher

Students expressed growth in their understandings of self, society, schooling, and their role in nurturing positive relationships. Whether they wrote about this, discussed it in small groups, or expressed it through poetry and other art forms, we grew together as a learning community.

As I reflect on this teaching experience, I am preparing to teach another group of eighth graders at TGA, this time in 15 virtual sessions, during a global pandemic and the continuation of the struggle for Black liberation and racial justice. I think of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and so many beautiful Black and Brown children who are no longer with us. I think of the Black Lives Matter movement, started by three Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. I think of the solidarity and resilience that my students have witnessed over the past few weeks of protests for racial justice. So, when tasked to (re)design this summer enrichment Language Arts course with a focus on narratives I plan to:

- Weave in excerpts from memoirs by Indigenous, Black and Brown authors, including:
  - *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
  - *Children of the Land* by Marcelo Hernandez Castillo
  - *I Was Their American Dream: A Graphic Memoir* by Malaka Gharib
  - *I Am Not a Number* by Jenny Kay Dupuis, Kathy Kacer, and Gillian Newland
  - *March Trilogy* by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, illustrated by Nate Powell
  - *Becoming Maria: Love and Chaos in the South Bronx* by Sonia Manzano
  - *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* by Lila Quintero Weaver
  - *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi
  - *The Beloved World of Sonia Sotomayor* by Sonia Sotomayor
  - *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker
- Read stories of Black joy and daily life (Stone, 2020). This includes narratives from the *We Need Diverse Book Anthologies Fresh Ink* edited by Lamar Giles and *The Hero Next Door* edited by Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich.
- Co-create text sets with students on issues they would like to process. As a class we could also read *This Book is Anti-Racist: 20 Lessons on How to Wake Up, Take Action, And Do the Work* by Tiffany Jewell and *Marley Dias Gets It Done: And So Can You* by Marley Dias. When I took the class to Langston Hughes' house in Harlem, the *I, Too, Arts Collective* was welcoming letters written to migrant children who had been separated from their families. Students wrote letters the morning of the trip. With more time and preparation on my part, students would have been better informed about the family separations, connecting this to their readings and studies of intersectionality. This would have been helpful not only for their letter writing but for those unfamiliar with the issue, supporting their understanding of how immigration policy impacts the lives of children.

I also hope to provide more theme-based “text club” (i.e., like book club) conversations to support students with topics, time to process with friends, and curate resources with them. Maybe this means embedding book talks, reading response pages and examples from their lives, and using all of these as “text evidence” for panel presentations on student-selected topics for the closing summer program celebration. It could involve creating text sets for future text clubs around specific topics: for example, pairing Jerry Craft’s

middle-grade graphic novel, *New Kid* (2019) with Watson's *Piecing Me Together* (2017) and having students discuss these topics across the lives of the protagonists in these texts.

The texts anchored our discussions and created entry points into tackling issues that matter to students. Most important, the decisions to delve into these issues came from the students as they chose whether to share, how to share, and for how long. Just as many wrote in their essays about Jade's changes and growth in confidence the students themselves developed their voices, amplified one another's dreams, and found different ways to process the challenges and resilience in their lives. We all learned a lot about ways to sustain our lives, our cultures, our languages, and our full humanity. My life is forever changed by these conversations, the thoughtful reading analysis, and life work. The ways middle-grade students navigate the different spaces and expectations in their lives, especially as Black and Brown children, provide lessons for us all.

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## About the Author



**Dr. Carla España** is an instructor in the Bilingual/TESOL program at Bank Street Graduate School of Education. Dr. España received her Ph.D. from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her teaching and learning from bilingual Latinx students began in Harlem, NYC with sixth graders. Dr. España's writing, teaching, and research examine the ways teachers and bilingual/multilingual students make meaning of their language practices and schooling. Her teaching and research interests include bilingual education, children's literature, translanguaging, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and teacher preparation. Follow her on Twitter @ProfesoraEspana.

# Discussing Race, Policing, and Privilege in a High School Classroom

Arianna Banack

Racial profiling, police brutality, and white privilege: these were three topics I knew I needed to talk about with my students, but I wasn't confident about how to approach them, especially with my position as a middle-class, white female. It was my fifth year of teaching ninth-grade English, and I wondered: would my students have an opportunity to discuss these important topics in other classes? If they had discussed racism and privilege before, those conversations need to be ongoing, so why weren't my classes adding to the conversation?

The high school in which I taught was a large school in the Northeast and had a predominantly Black and Hispanic population (approximately 80 percent). The school participated in the Community Eligibility Program (Community Eligibility Program, 2019), which provides free meals to students who are enrolled at a school in low-income areas. From previous but scarce class discussions around racism, "othering," and stereotyping, I knew these topics were timely and meaningful to my students (Drossopoulos & King-Watkins, 2018). I also knew that while books in my curriculum like *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry, 1958) could facilitate discussions around race, I wanted to find literature that would center topics of race, privilege, and police brutality in a way that was more contemporary and relevant to the time period.

## Turning Towards Young Adult Literature: Why YAL?

As an advocate for and avid reader of young adult literature (YAL), I knew the genre could offer books that would directly address social issues in meaningful ways and encourage growth in students' thinking. I am in the second year of a doctoral program specializing in literacy with a concentration in children's and young adult literature, and I have spent the last two years reading and researching using YAL in the classroom. Thanks to this access to research literature, I now have citations to support my assertions about YAL's engaging nature and usefulness in a secondary setting (see Gallo, 1982; Ivey & Johnson, 2013; Darragh & Radmer, 2016; Buehler, 2016; Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2020). But when I reflect upon how and why I chose to turn to YAL in 2017, I recognize it was because of craft knowledge as defined by Murphy (2019): an "understanding gathered over time by practitioners, including through stories, ad hoc observations, and intuition" (p. 16). I intuitively knew that using YAL to teach would foster meaningful conversations with my students and give them a chance to find relevance in the text.

## Finding the Book: *All American Boys*

The search for the right YA novel began by reflecting on what I had previously read around the #BlackLivesMatter movement and asking my colleagues for recommendations. I decided on *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, winner of the 2016 Walter Dean Myers Award and Coretta Scott King Book Award Honor. I found the dual character narration and dual racial identity of the authors compelling, as the novel tells a complex and nuanced story of an act of police brutality. I also believed the dual narration would allow students to engage with multiple perspectives in ways that support empathy development and critical thinking. See Figure 1 for a synopsis of the novel.

Rashad is a 16-year-old Black male who is wrongly accused of trying to steal from a convenience store. A white police officer, who assumes Rashad is guilty, forcibly removes and beats him. Quinn, a white male classmate of Rashad, sees Rashad brutalized by the police officer, Paul Galluzzo. Paul is the older brother of Quinn's best friend and helped raise Quinn after Quinn's father's death. While Rashad is in the hospital as a result of his injuries, the words "Rashad Is Absent Again Today" are spray painted on the sidewalk outside of his school. Both Quinn and Rashad struggle to decide how, and if, they want to take action and what consequences may result from their actions

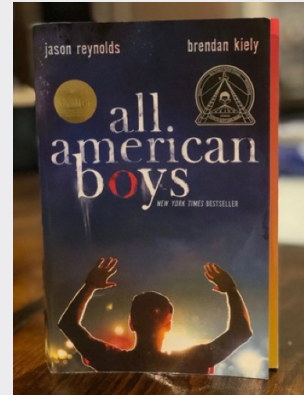


Figure 1. Summary of *All American Boys*

Reynolds and Kiely directly address issues of racism, police brutality, and privilege, which is what I wanted from a novel. For example, a friend of Quinn's and cousin of Paul's states: "I don't think most people think they're racist. But every time something like this happens, you could, like you said, say, 'not my problem.' You could say, 'it's a one-time thing.' Every time it happened" (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 184). This explicit naming and explanation of racism is woven throughout the text, in stark contrast to all the other texts in the curricula. At the conclusion of the novel, Quinn joins a public protest in support of Rashad and reflects on racism and privilege:

Some people had told me racism was a thing of the past, they'd told me not to get involved. But that was nuts. *They* were nuts. And more to the point—they'd all been white people. Well, guess what? I'm white too—and that's exactly *why* I was marching. I had to. Because racism was alive and real as shit. It was everywhere and all mixed up in everything... Nothing was going to change unless we did something about it. *We!* White people! (p. 292)

In *All American Boys*, Reynolds and Kiely urge their readers to reflect on their own beliefs, values, and actions. The novel doesn't shy away from difficult topics—and brings these issues to the forefront of classroom discussion.

### Looking Back: Moments of Discomfort and Sharing

When I conceived this unit, I pictured students having engaging class discussions, sharing their opinions, and reading passionately every day. I soon learned that my students weren't always as eager or comfortable discussing these topics as I had hoped. When I started the unit, we were three-quarters of the way through the school year, and a class culture of mutual respect, care, and rapport had already been established. While many students shared personal stories and demonstrated a willingness to engage in difficult conversations, I was, naively, surprised when some of my students acknowledged feeling "awkward" (their words) when discussing racism and police brutality specifically. I would have benefited from knowing the words from Kay (2018), who reminds us:

Just as we cannot conjure *safe spaces* from midair, we should not expect the familial intimacy, vulnerability, and forgiveness needed for meaningful race conversations to emerge from traditional classroom relationships (p. 29).

I was expecting the same intimacy and openness I saw my students demonstrate when discussing other texts, but had not considered how this specific text, one that names racism as a contemporary issue, would elicit a different kind of vulnerability from my students, many of whom consistently experienced systemic racism.

### ***“You’re White”***

In a discussion activity I asked students to respond to the question: How comfortable do you feel talking about races and cultures outside of your own? Why? Some students stated that they felt a little uncomfortable because they didn’t want to offend me as a white person. When I asked why they thought they would offend me, Aliyah (all student names are pseudonyms) answered, “Well because you’re white and sometimes white people don’t do the best things, like Paul in our book, so I don’t want you to feel bad.” Other students echoed this sentiment; Alexis remarked, “Well you’re not like them but it’s hard not to generalize.” When asked what she meant by “them” she reiterated I wasn’t like a “bad white person” who would hurt someone like Paul did. Many other students used language signaling an “us vs. them” mentality when they referred to white people and police officers. Their language signaled that my students often felt marginalized by white people, and my presence was a reminder of that daily reality. I assured the class that they wouldn’t offend me and that I wanted them to feel comfortable sharing. I also said that I was not a representative of all white people and that I would not shy away from pointing out the racist actions of white people.

The power dynamics of the classroom could have added extra pressure on the students to censor their feelings if they feared offending me. While the power dynamic of me being a white middle-class female was present in the classroom, there was also the reality of me being responsible for my students’ grades. I attempted to alleviate student concerns about grades by grading many assignments solely on completion. For example, in their weekly journal entries, as long as students reflected on what we had read that week, they would receive credit. I hoped the recognition that there was no “right” answer would allow them to feel more comfortable expressing their opinions through their writing. Additionally, during discussion activities, I did not grade students on participation in case they were uncomfortable sharing. Class discussion was an ungraded activity that was meant to enhance learning and critical thinking.

Thinking back, I should have taken the time at the beginning of the unit to address the racial differences between myself and my students. While the racial makeup of the school was 80 percent Black and Hispanic, my classroom was even higher because I had only two white students. I should have positioned myself as someone who strove to be an ally and an advocate to my students before we started reading and discussing racism and privilege. I should have acknowledged my own white privilege and shown vulnerability before expecting it from my students. I also could have shared the background research I was doing to create the unit and share all the unlearning I was doing as a white woman, as well as letting my students know I was there to learn from them.

A tenant of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1996) is that race is a social construct. I should have taken the time to define this with my students. I did not define race with them, but instead assumed my students had working definitions of race. Having a definition of race would have helped my students and myself grapple with naming race in the classroom. There were missed opportunities for me to show my students that I was committed to having meaningful discussions about race and white privilege and that this unit was not about me or my feelings.

## **“No, Thanks”**

The discussion of my whiteness was not the only instance of students showing their discomfort. They were often upset at being stereotyped, like the character Rashad, and while many students told their stories, there were some who, when asked to describe a specific instance, would simply say “no, thanks.” These moments occurred during whole class discussions like a four corners activity, in which I asked students to read statements related to themes in the novel. These included statements like “I feel like police officers are there to protect the people in my community” and “People feel uncomfortable discussing racism.” I asked them to circle whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statement and to explain their thinking in writing. I would then attach posters to four corners of the classroom with the choices of *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. After the students reflected individually, I read the statements aloud and asked students to move physically to the corner of the room matching their choice. I asked them to share their opinions with classmates who had made the same choice, and then each group shared their discussion with the whole class.

When discussing the statement “I experience (or see others experience) racism, prejudice, and/or stereotyping in my daily life,” all of my students stood under either the agree or strongly agree sign. After giving them a chance to debrief with their classmates, I asked for the group to share. While some students shared stories of being followed around by salespeople in stores or thinking a teacher didn’t like them because of their race, other students simply shook their heads or said “I’d rather not, no thanks, and not now,” when I asked if anyone else would like to share.

Students were given multiple avenues to reflect on the novel (whole class, individual, peer sharing). Jayden demonstrated his hesitation with sharing through one of his weekly journal entries. He wrote that he experienced an interaction with a white cop, but did not wish to give any more details. This statement in his journal was brief and vague as he acknowledged both his experience with police brutality and his reluctance to share any further details.

While I did not press any of my students to share, either during discussion or in their writing, I do not know if they felt uncomfortable sharing with me or their peers, if the memory was too difficult to retell, or a combination of all, or none of these things. However, their silence spoke volumes. My students had had many experiences around racism and I was expecting them to share those experiences—without considering how painful it might be for them. The silences told a story of their own, and I recognize the many factors, like power dynamics or emotional trauma, that could have been present for my students to choose silence in those moments.

I learned from instances like this that my students felt much more comfortable discussing their opinions from a distance. When I would ask, “When have you seen others being stereotyped?” or “How does Rashad get stereotyped and how does that happen in our world today?”, most students who declined to share their personal stories would readily share stories of people they knew, things they saw at school, or identify and discuss instances of stereotyping in *All American Boys*. While the novel opened the door for discussions around race and stereotypes, I realized these were deeply personal topics for some of my students, who weren’t ready to share with me or their peers.



### ***“My Dad’s a Cop”***

Another reality I neglected to consider when planning a unit around police brutality was that some of my students had parents who worked in law enforcement. During a mid-unit whole-class discussion, Makayla said that it was very unfair for all cops to get a bad reputation because of the bad cops out there. She explained that her dad was a police officer and that she was afraid for him every day when he went to work. A similar conversation occurred with three other students who had family members or family friends who worked in law enforcement. I acknowledged these students’ feelings but was at a loss to explain that police brutality is a systemic problem in our country and that discussing police brutality and #BlackLivesMatter was not a personal attack on their loved ones.

I was concerned with making my students feel safe during discussion and spent so much time reassuring them that our conversation was not an insult to their loved ones that I missed an opportunity to discuss the history of police brutality. These conversations were not only uncomfortable for me, but for the students who voiced feeling unsafe around police officers— who were met with comments like, “My dad would never do that.” Sometimes the students would push back and ask, “How do you know?” or they would concede and acknowledge they weren’t specifically speaking about that student’s loved one.

The novel complicated students’ perspectives on police officers. Rashad’s father was a former police officer who admitted he stereotyped an innocent Black boy and ultimately shot and paralyzed him. After reading this scene, students who had families in law enforcement seemed shocked and conceded that it was possible for “good cops” to make “bad decisions.” This scene led to a class discussion around how fear of Black people has been so engrained in our society that even Black police officers have internalized this bias. Some students noted that being Black is often associated with being guilty and that Rashad’s dad made the same assumption. Rashad’s dad being guilty of harming an innocent Black boy caused many students to take a step back and reassess how pervasive racism is in our society and how that affects policing.

### ***“The Police Don’t Protect My Community”***

When responding to a four corners activity statement—*I feel like police officers are there to protect the people in my community*—Ryan stood on the disagree side. He asked, “If police officers are there to protect us, why do my parents have to have the ‘police talk’ with us?” This spurred a lively discussion, with students contributing rules they had been given on how to interact with the police: always show your hands, don’t make sudden movements, and do what the officer asks. Jaida turned to me and asked, “Did your parents tell you this?” I said no. Apart from my parents telling me to be respectful of police officers, there were no other rules or conversations about how I should behave around the police.

The student who asked exclaimed “*See!*” and gestured to me. When I asked her to say more she explained that police are not there to protect Black people like her, but to protect white people like me. During this discussion, many students shared the conversations they had had with their relatives and peers about how to interact with law enforcement. For some students this conversation created a sense of community as they discussed a common experience, while for the two white students and students with family in law enforcement, it created a moment of reflection on our privilege. These exchanges highlight how uncomfortable moments and moments of sharing were often inextricably linked throughout the unit.

In response to this conversation, we watched excerpts from a PBS documentary, *The Talk: Race in America*, which shows “conversation taking place in homes and communities across the country between parents

of color and their children, especially sons, about how to behave if they are ever stopped by the police” (pbs.org/wnet/the-talk/). Watching the documentary helped bridge gaps and understanding. Everyone in the class listened to the multiple viewpoints from parents, children, the police, and community members and empathized with their stories. These new perspectives added a layer of nuance to our discussion.

### **“Does the Way a Person Looks Trigger a Fear Response?”**

At the end of the unit students worked in self-selected groups of two or three peers to share their learning in a form of their own choosing. I suggested creating a movie trailer, writing poetry or a news article, or making an artistic representation of themes/scenes from the book. Throughout the unit, we had examined a variety of spoken word poems (e.g., “Hashtag” by Prentice Powell, Black Ice, and Chief the Poet, youtube.com/watch?v=MnDA2vPj-sQ) and songs (e.g., “Water Guns” by Toddrick Hall, featuring Jordin Sparks) that my students could use as exemplars in creating their summative assessment.

In response, the students created some of the most meaningful work I had seen all year. One group created an informational video about racial profiling. They acted out scenes from the novel where Rashad was profiled, defined racial profiling, and discussed how it is harmful to our society. Another group wrote and performed a rap from the perspectives of different characters in the novel. They spoke through the voices of Quinn, Rashad, Paul, and Katie (another witness of Rashad’s brutalization). Kesnah, who was often quiet in class, elected to work alone and wrote and recited a poem inspired by the novel. See Figure 2 for an excerpt from his poem. His peers gave him a standing ovation when he finished reciting the poem, showing their respect for his words and his bravery in sharing.

Does the way a person look trigger a fear response and that causes you to drive them away?  
We’re all humans and because a human looks different than what you like doesn’t mean the human  
is less of a human than you  
Just because a human looks like something you fear doesn’t mean the human IS to be feared  
Us humans need to stop fearing each other and stop attacking another for dumb reasons like  
someone’s skin tone...  
A black man is still a human and will always be a human.  
Same for the white men, the Asian men, the European men  
And the Black woman, the White woman, the Hispanic woman, the Asian woman, the European  
women...  
We are all human and we shouldn’t treat others like they are less of a human because of what they  
look like.

Figure 2. Excerpt From a Student Poem Inspired by *All American Boys*

Sharing their projects with the class was the final assignment in the eight-week unit on *All American Boys*. I ended the unit this way because I wanted students to feel ownership over their projects so they could express what they had learned in an authentic way.

### **Looking Back: Reflecting Critically**

Two years after teaching this unit and with the advantage of being enrolled in a literacy graduate program, I reflect with a much more critical eye. Many of the uncomfortable moments could have been mitigated by

more intentional planning and a stronger vision for the unit. If I had structured the unit to center around understanding the systemic oppression of people of color, I could have better explained the history of police brutality and white privilege and clearly articulated my positionality. I could have guided my students to research how these systems of oppression are at work in our society today and create opportunities to discuss as a class how race is a social construct.

There would still be uncomfortable moments during discussions, but the purpose of the unit would be clearer both to myself and to my students. My students were from diverse cultural backgrounds that differed not only from mine, but from each other's. Students would get upset when discussing stereotypes, and remark, "That's unfair—that doesn't represent me!" There were moments when voices were raised and we had to talk about how to respectfully disagree with one another. There were bound to be some moments of discomfort in such emotional discussions, but it was my responsibility as the teacher to make sure we were having productive discussions.

When I was teaching in 2017, I had not heard of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1996) or antiracist pedagogy (see Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Baker-Bell, 2019; Kay, 2018). In my current position as a graduate student, I am encouraged to spend my time thinking and writing about how to apply CRT and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) to my practice (Groenke, Garcia, Banack & Metheny, 2018). I have thought about my positionality as a middle-class, white woman and committed to being an antiracist educator and advocate.

One step in that direction might include bringing these lessons into a course I teach for pre-service teachers on how to use YAL in the secondary classroom and giving them the language, tools, and practices to support the teaching of #BlackLivesMatter texts. It will be important to tell my undergraduate students, as I should have told my ninth graders, that I, too, am still learning. Bettina Love (2020) reminds us:

The shift to anti-racism does not happen overnight or after one professional development session: It happens through a process of self-discovery, healing, and learning to reject and call out racist ideas, people, and structures. Anti-racist teaching is not a teaching approach or method, it is a way of life.

In my future classes, pre-service teachers will find readings on Critical Race English Education (CRT) (Johnson, 2018), white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), and abolitionist and anti-racist pedagogy along with professional anti-racist resources and teaching (see this blog post by Sarigianides & Borsheim-Black, 2020). Scholars of color will be highlighted in course syllabi (see Durand, 2015; Emdin, 2016; Toliver, 2020, Clark, 2019, to start) along with #ownvoices novels, to model the importance of a sustained approach to racial literacy in a classroom (Skerrett, 2011). Students will also be exposed to critiques of popular anti-racist activities (see Leonardo, 2004; Lensmire et al., 2013), such as privilege walks inspired by McIntosh's (1988) article examining white privilege.

Another step in becoming an anti-racist educator is to ask my students to examine their own positionality and reflect on what types of privilege they bring into the classroom with them. As we unpack our own privilege and biases, we will discuss the CRT tenant of race being a social construct and look at what systems of oppression are at work in today's society. Then we will examine how those systems are related to the educational systems, curricula development, and books they will teach their future students. My students will be reminded—as I always remind myself—that becoming an anti-racist teacher requires constant work and reflection.

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### About the Author



**Arianna Banack** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, in the literacy studies program with a specialization in children’s and young adult literature. She is currently serving as one of the assistant editors of *The ALAN Review*. Her research interests focus on the connections between adolescent reading engagement and YAL. Prior to enrolling at UTK, Arianna was a ninth-grade English teacher in Connecticut. Arianna has been published in several peer-reviewed journals, including *English Journal* and *The ALAN Review*.

# If I Knew Then What I Do Now: Fostering Pre-Service Teachers' Capacity to Promote Expansive and Critical Conversations with Children's Literature

*Stephen Adam Crawley*

As class dismissed one early November afternoon, Courtney<sup>1</sup> and another student approached me with a question. Throughout the semester, we had discussed the important role children's literature provides as windows and mirrors for youth (Bishop, 1990). On this particular day we had explored a wide range of representations in books, including chronic illness, social class, sexual orientation, religion, and death. She asked, "Dr. Crawley, did you ever have these books in your classroom when you were an elementary teacher?" It was an honest and important question, and one I had often thought about as well.

I said that no, I did not share such children's literature with my students during my 12 years as an elementary teacher and regretted it. I contextualized my answer, describing how I felt vulnerable as an elementary teacher (largely related to my non-heterosexual orientation), which caused me to self-censor. I recalled how diverse children's literature or other emphases on supporting diverse youth and topics—to my recollection—was not much discussed in my own undergraduate teacher education program, the primary professional development informing the majority of my teaching years. I explained to Courtney that as a result, one of my course goals was to provide concepts and strategies that would help prepare them in ways I felt unprepared as a teacher.

In this article, I reflect on my practices as a teacher educator and respond to the following questions: How do I foster pre-service teachers' capacity to use children's literature to promote expansive and critical conversations in the classroom? How do pre-service teachers report their stances and sense of preparedness when reflecting on the course? To address these questions, I share two strategies I employed in my undergraduate course for elementary education majors. For each strategy, I include pre-service teachers' statements reflecting how the strategy impacted their stances about children's literature and preparedness to foster expansive and critical conversations that are relevant and responsive to students' diverse lives.

## **Literature Review**

Reviewing research about children's literature and its use for fostering critical and expansive conversations, I identified two central areas: "difficult" terminology and pre-service training.

### ***Reframing "Difficult" Terminology***

For over two decades, researchers and teacher educators have discussed the use of children's literature to foster conversations about race, ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, divorce, chronic illness, and death, among other topics. Scholars have explicitly used the term "difficult" when describing such topics (Husbye, Buchholz, Powell, & Zanden, 2019; Gibbs, 2016). Similar referents have also been used. For example, Bowen and Schutt (2007) used "sensitive" to describe adoption, pregnancy, aging, war, and violence. Hollingsworth (2009) called exploring race "complicated,"

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<sup>1</sup> All pre-service teachers' names are pseudonyms.

Shlafer and Scignoli (2015) noted the concept of incarcerated parents was “tough,” and Husbye et al. (2019) termed conversations about death “brave” and “heavy.” Other words used to describe such literature and conversations include “courageous” (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998), “dangerous” (Ballentine & Hill, 2000; Bigler & Collins, 1995; Nieto, 2009), “challenging” (Nieto, 2009), “hard” (Flores, Vlach, & Lammert, 2019; Gibbs, 2016), “controversial” (Darvin, 2017; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019; Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2017), “edgy” (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020), “risky,” and “uncomfortable” (Leland et al., 2017).

The repeated framing of children’s literature and subsequent conversations as difficult is important to consider for multiple reasons. First, such terminology may reinforce pre-service teachers’ already existing fears or concerns and thus limit the likelihood of them embarking on such reading with their students. Second, the terminology may allude to conversations being difficult for the teacher rather than the children. In other words, the focus is on the teacher’s anxiety and discomfort about the topic and how to navigate conversation. This distracts from many children’s realities—having particular identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation) and experiences (e.g., parents’ divorce, family member’s death) with limited opportunities to see reflections of themselves or discuss their experiences with others. Despite adults’ hesitations about particular topics in the classroom, research has shown that children are often ready, willing, and able to have important conversations in respectful and meaningful ways (Crawley, 2020; Cueto & Corapi, 2019; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018).

Instead of framing particular topics and texts as difficult, some scholars use different terms, including “critical” (Darvin, 2017; Flores, Vlach, & Lammert, 2019), “expansive” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and “contemporary realism” (Short, Lynch-Brown, & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 122). While contemporary realism “often focuses on current societal issues...that are part of many children’s lives” (Short et al., 2017, p. 122), the term is specific to the realistic fiction genre. I primarily use the terms expansive and critical because they can function across genres. The terms expansive (i.e., widening and nuancing understandings) and critical (i.e., recognizing the necessity of the topic and the power of critical inquiry) emphasize the importance, responsiveness, and relevance of topics rather than their difficulty. Such terms might increasingly foster pre-service teachers’ capacity to promote conversations with children’s literature—conversations particularly necessary in a political climate that attacks the rights and respect of marginalized individuals and appears devoid of empathy for those outside dominant, mainstream cultures (Flores et al., 2019; Kitzmiller, 2018).

### ***Exploring Teacher Education Practices***

Numerous studies explore using children’s literature with pre-service teachers. Sharp, Diego-Medrano, and Coneway (2018) found that 53 of 69 university-based teacher education programs in Texas required pre-service teachers to take a children’s literature course. Analyzing course syllabi, the researchers identified nine themes related to learning outcomes. Two themes addressed the use of children’s literature to explore identities and experiences. For example, under the theme “appreciation and value of children’s literature,” some syllabi addressed literature’s potential to impact students’ lives “personally, socially, and academically” (Sharp, Diego-Medrano, & Coneway, 2017, p. 7). Under the theme “evaluating children’s literature,” two learning outcome sub-categories included “the influence of texts on individuals, cultural milieu, and society” and “biases and stereotypes with gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, family circumstances, and socioeconomic status” (p. 8).

In a separate study, Flores and colleagues (2019) conducted an extensive review of empirical research documenting children’s literature use with pre-service teachers to foster “transformative (e.g., culturally

relevant) pedagogies” (p. 214). Several of the studies Flores and colleagues describe involve teacher educators who not only shared and discussed books with pre-service teachers in expansive and critical ways (e.g., Mosley & Rogers, 2011), but transferred the pre-service teachers’ use of texts with actual youth via the creation of lesson plans (e.g., Glenn, 2012) and collaboration with mentor teachers in field placements (e.g., Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013).

Other research details how teacher educators share children’s literature and elicit pre-service teachers’ responses about whether or not they would use the books in their classroom and why. For example, as a means to explore pre-service teachers’ statements relative to religious pluralism and neutrality, Dávila (2015) read *In My Family/En Mi Familia* (Garza, 1996) and analyzed pre-service teachers’ survey responses. Hermann-Wilmarth (2010) asked pre-service teachers to select one of three gay and lesbian-inclusive novels for upper elementary school readers and share their responses in small groups. Wollman-Bonilla (1998) read and facilitated discussion about a variety of picture books and chapter books depicting topics including racism, homelessness, gender stereotypes, and death.

In all of the studies, the pre-service teachers’ responses ranged from a desire to share the books with children to facilitate discussion about identity and experience to being hesitant about or even resisting the texts. Pre-service teachers’ hesitation and resistance stemmed from considering topics as risky (Dávila, 2015, p. 69), inappropriate in various ways (Wollman-Bonilla, 1998, p. 289), and objectionable to parents (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2010, p. 188). Pre-service teachers’ concerns about parents as a reason for not including diverse children’s literature in their classrooms is well documented (Bouley, 2011; Dedeoglu, Ulusoy, & Lamme, 2012; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019).

The body of research demonstrates that teacher educators have done much to share, explore, and support pre-service teachers’ use of children’s literature to promote expansive and critical conversation. However, the research also demonstrates that more promotion of pre-service teachers’ capacity to foster expansive and critical conversations with children’s literature in their classrooms is needed—especially in relation to concern about stakeholders such as parents and school administrators.

### **Providing Context: The Course, Instructor, and Pre-service Teachers**

I teach at a large university in the midwestern United States, serving as literacy education faculty within the broader elementary education program. Although aspects of my identity align with the majority of the program’s undergraduate students and faculty (i.e., cisgender, White), my other identities (i.e., man, gay) differ both at my institution and in elementary education writ large. I share my identities because they not only provide my positionality as a researcher but also indicate how they might impact students’ perceptions of me as a teacher educator.

In this article, I focus on one course I teach, “Children’s Literature Across the Curriculum,” in the undergraduate elementary education program. Pre-service teachers enrolled in the program work toward certification in first through eighth grades. While the children’s literature course is scheduled to occur during pre-service teachers’ sophomore year, many students take the course at other times in their program of study. For many of the pre-service teachers, the course is one of their first literacy education classes. The course includes topics such as book awards, genres, formats, connections across content areas, youth interest, narrative and visual elements, history of the field, types of literary criticism, read-aloud strategies, and diverse representations.



Here, I examine practices and pre-service teachers' responses from Fall 2019. During that semester, I taught two sections of the course. Twenty-one pre-service teachers were enrolled in each section, for a total of 42 taking the class. The majority identified as female and White. Many were in their early 20s and had attended high school in our university's state. As their concluding assignment, I asked the pre-service teachers to write a reflective essay to share their top five "take-aways" from the course. Students could select any course topics for their take-aways, and I was personally curious to see which topics were most prevalent. Once the semester ended and grades were posted, I e-mailed all the pre-service teachers—regardless of the content of their essays—asking for permission to use excerpts of their writing for my inquiry into pre-service teachers' stances about and sense of preparedness to use diverse children's literature in their classrooms. Nine pre-service teachers—all of whom addressed diversity in their papers—completed the formal consent process. Although the nine students represent less than a quarter of the enrollment, the majority of students across both classes discussed diversity in their essays.

### **Strategies for Fostering Pre-service Teacher Capacity**

Analyzing the nine essays, I identified two strategies that were most discussed by the pre-service teachers: (1) emphasizing windows and mirrors and (2) considering stakeholder responses. While these were not the sole strategies I incorporated to foster the pre-service teachers' capacity, they are the ones that most resonated with them. For each strategy, I provide context and share excerpts from the pre-service teachers' essays to highlight how they reported their understandings and current capacity to use children's literature to foster expansive and critical conversations in the classroom. It is important to note that the pre-service teachers' discussion of the topics came late in the semester, not immediately following class activities, reflecting how the strategies continued to impact and resonate with them as the course concluded.

#### ***Strategy #1: Emphasizing Windows and Mirrors***

Throughout the semester, literature's ability to provide windows and mirrors for readers (Bishop, 1990) was a central frame. In our second class session, we read and discussed Bishop's well-known essay and continued to use her metaphor in subsequent weeks as we explored texts across various genres, formats, and content area connections. In nearly every class session, we discussed how books can serve as windows and mirrors for identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, dis/ability), experiences (e.g., divorce, chronic illness, death, homelessness), and intersections of identities and experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). We also read and discussed how the metaphor of windows and mirrors has been expanded. For example, we examined the role of texts as maps for children's futures (Myers, 2014), the importance of ensuring accurate and respectful depictions rather than distorted "fun-house mirrors" (Reese, 2015), and the necessity to consider authorship as informed by #OwnVoices (Yorio, 2018).

Throughout the semester, we returned to the windows and mirrors metaphor and asserted that such representations are important for *all* children. We discussed how a book that is a window for one child might be a mirror for someone else, and how children often have identities that we may be unaware of as teachers (e.g., related to sexual orientation or religion). Therefore, it's imperative to share many representations rather than limit representations to those that we assume exist in our classroom. In addition, I emphasized that such books need to be read directly to youth. It is not enough for them to be present on bookshelves because there is no guarantee that children will select the books on their own.

We explored additional resources to expand understandings of windows and mirrors. For example, we

interpreted graphs showing the lack of diversity in classroom libraries (Crisp et al., 2016) and speculated on why classroom libraries were so homogenous relative to race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and language. As a group, we surmised that perhaps teachers were not aware of the increasing numbers of diverse books, had limited access to or funding for books, had not used or prioritized windows and mirrors as a frame when curating their collection, or censored certain books and topics. We also realized that the lack of diversity could stem from a combination of these and other factors. In addition to the article, we viewed a TED talk cautioning against repeating dominant narratives and thus perpetuating a single story (Adichie, 2009) and we read an article about expanding and nuancing understandings of particular identities and experiences via text sets (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

To expand on these readings, resources, and discussions, I facilitated an exploratory activity. I placed baskets around the room, each basket labeled with a particular identity or experience and filled with representative children's literature. For example, one basket was labeled "chronic illness" and included *Sadako* (Coerr, 1993), *Hair for Mama* (Tinkham, 2007), and *The Goodbye Cancer Garden* (Matthies, 2011). Another basket was labeled "sexual orientation" and contained *In Our Mothers' House* (Polacco, 2009), *Antonio's Card/La Tarjeta de Antonio* (González, 2005), and *Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude* (Winter, 2009).

The pre-service teachers were given time to visit various baskets, read sample texts, record book titles and make notes for their future classrooms, and discuss their observations. This book basket exploration was not the only time we read and discussed children's literature depicting diverse identities and realities, but it provided the pre-service teachers with an opportunity to encounter dozens of books during a single class session along with reinforcing the breadth and growing availability of diverse representations.

In their final papers, all nine of the pre-service teachers discussed the importance of children's literature in depicting diverse identities and experiences, and six of them included "windows and mirrors" as the first takeaway in their essays. Reflecting on her own identities and how the course impacted her thinking, Courtney wrote, "As a white and mostly privileged student, I never had difficulty finding texts that didn't relate to me, but this course has given me a window to see how other students in my classroom may have been feeling." Megan also discussed how children's literature can help students empathize with others:

Literature is a way for any person to find some way to connect to something bigger than themselves. It can often be difficult to connect to people when you don't know how you feel or to people when they don't understand what you are experiencing. The concept of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors allows readers to see things from their own experiences, to see things others can be experiencing, and to step into a world that they may not have otherwise found.

Other pre-service teachers not only wrote about the benefits of windows and mirrors on readers, but listed specific books, representations, and possibilities. For example, Karen listed *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005), *El Deafo* (Bell, 2014), and *Brown Girl Dreaming* (Woodson, 2014) as "paramount" for the classroom, and Stephanie cited *The Rooster Who Would Not Be Quiet* (Deedy, 2017) as a book she would read aloud to discuss discrimination. Michelle wrote about how sharing children's literature can address racism: "Providing diverse literature about ethnic and cultural groups can start to combat these issues and change the mindset students have that one color of skin is superior to others." She also wrote that children's literature can "open the door for discussions on real world issues, acceptance, inclusion, etc." relative to "LGBTIA+, social class, religion, illness, etc." Similarly, Mary wrote,

I want to be able to show my students different types of books and that incorporate different types of real life situations.... I want books that talk about divorce, same-sex parents, loss of a family member, blindness, deafness, and so many other subjects. I want kids to have books that they can relate to on a personal level. You never know what is going on in a child's life that you have in class.

Michelle's and Mary's use of such phrases as "open the door for discussions" and "I want to be able to show" demonstrate the pre-service teachers' intent to use books with their students in ways that forefront identity and experience. Another pre-service teacher, Rachel, emphasized the importance of directly using such books rather than simply making them available:

While reading children's books aloud can teach a lesson, choosing good books that are relatable also reinforces (sic) the children's books are written to "illuminate what it means to be human and to make the most fundamental experiences of life accessible—love, hope, loneliness, despair, fear, and belonging" (Short et al., 2017, p. 4). There is so much that goes into readalouds.

As I reflect on the pre-service teachers' statements about children's literature as windows and mirrors, I am heartened by their conviction. At the same time, I realize their sentiments may not automatically translate into using such texts in their classrooms, especially because they may feel pressured to incorporate so much into their day-to-day teaching and adhere to the demands of multiple stakeholders. I also acknowledge that the strategy of introducing a variety of texts to pre-service teachers and emphasizing their importance as windows and mirrors is not new. As discussed in the literature review, this is a practice multiple teacher educators have employed as indicated by at least two decades of empirical research. Nonetheless, the strategy of introducing students to diverse texts and discussing their role as windows and mirrors is an important first step for building pre-service teacher capacity.

### ***Strategy #2: Considering Stakeholder Responses***

Although the pre-service teachers recognized the value of diverse texts for their future students, they frequently voiced their reticence to have or use such books in their classroom due to concern about how stakeholders—specifically parents, guardians, and/or administrators—might respond. As already noted, there is ample research documenting similar concerns by pre-service teachers (Bouley, 2011; Dedeoglu et al., 2012; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2010; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019). Therefore, we again engaged in professional reading followed by activities.

First, we explored infographics documenting the most frequently challenged books and topics, including who submits challenges, and from where (American Library Association, 2018). We read a blog post about the need for inclusive books in classrooms written from the author's perspective and experiences as a mother, former K-12 public school teacher, and current director of professional education in a university (Fuxa, 2017). Among the many important points she raises, the author says she never received a parental complaint in response to a book she had read in the classroom. We also read an article detailing the experiences of two teachers who navigated parental resistance in different states and grades (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2018). Both the blog post and the article were well suited to our context in that they document experiences in the midwestern U.S., similar to the settings where many of the pre-service teachers in my class have lived and may likely teach.

Several pre-service teachers noted the impact of the readings on stakeholder responses and how to navigate them. For example, Megan noted, "it is important to keep in mind that parents might resist some books that

are brought into the classroom, but [the authors] bring insight of different ways to go about the difficulties in parental resistance.” Similarly, Michelle wrote, “We have learned that others will potentially have lots of opinions about your classroom. This could be a parent, an administrator, [or] another teacher, but you need to be confident in your decisions and be able to back them up.” In her statement, Michelle not only listed various stakeholders that pre-service teachers—and in-service educators—encounter, but addressed the importance of providing the rationale for practices. These rationales were discussed during the readings and then reinforced through subsequent class activities.

Following the readings, I facilitated experiences to further support the pre-service teachers’ consideration of potential stakeholder response. To begin, I read *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) and discussed how the book could be connected to curriculum (e.g., habitats and animals in science) and other conversations (e.g., diverse family structures). I then asked the pre-service teachers to write a rationale for the book—or another book of their choosing—if a question or concern were raised by a parent or administrator. As the pre-service teachers drafted their responses, I encouraged them to consider their statements as a “rationale” rather than a “defense.” This terminology is important in that it emphasizes pro-activeness and educator expertise rather than being reactive and potentially laden with anxiety.

After providing time to draft their rationales, I formed the pre-service teachers into small groups and asked them to engage in role-playing as teachers, parents, and/or administrators. When it was the “teacher’s” turn, the pre-service teacher would provide a brief summary of their focal book. The group would then enter into the role-play scenario with the “parent” or “administrator” expressing their question or concern about the book, the “teacher” responding, and both continuing a brief conversation. Others in the group served as observers, providing feedback after the role-play concluded. Each person in the group took turns in the various roles. Throughout the role-play activity, I encouraged the pre-service teachers to use the practices described in the readings, including meeting face-to-face (rather than communicating via e-mail), acknowledging the stakeholder’s perspective, and—as a last resort—offering to provide an alternate book and activity to the child while continuing the reading and exploration with the rest of the class.

The rationale and role-play activities arose in the pre-service teachers’ final essays. Rachel wrote, “It was scary to think about the parental pushback that could occur over certain topics.... Learning how to have not only difficult conversations with students but with parents was very beneficial for me.” Her statement demonstrates how the concept of difficult is internalized as a pre-service teacher and was reinforced by her statement of parental resistance being “scary.” Sara similarly expressed her reticence as well as how the class activities aided her:

Dealing with parents is something that I have been worried about for the future but after reading this blog and having discussions about it in class has helped calm my worries.... The roleplay activity we did after really helped me act out how I would deal with being in a situation where a parent had a problem with a book read in class. I had the practice of trying to show parents the reasoning behind using books they may deem controversial; and I was able to see how I should not be afraid of using those types of books in my classroom because of those windows and mirrors that they open to students.

Sara raised many vital points in her writing. First, she highlighted the shifts in her thinking from concern to increased confidence. Second, her phrases such as “read in class” and “using books” demonstrated her intent to more directly share books with students beyond merely making them available. She transferred the concept of books as controversial to being a possible parent perspective rather than her own, and she concluded by reconnecting back to the importance of books as mirrors and windows for youth.

Through reading various perspectives, crafting rationales, and engaging in roleplay, it is evident the pre-service teachers' concerns about potential stakeholder response were somewhat alleviated. The experiences aided their feelings of preparedness, thus impacting their capacity to use children's literature to foster expansive and critical conversations in their future classrooms.

## Discussion

Despite the strategies of emphasizing windows and mirrors and considering stakeholder responses, I fear that these alone are not enough to foster the pre-service teachers' confidence and ability to use children's literature to promote expansive and critical conversations in the classroom. As I reflect on these two strategies, I see a significant gap. Asking the pre-service teachers to consider stakeholder responses assumes they will have actually used the texts in their classrooms. Although I shared with the pre-service teachers books they could use as windows and mirrors followed by how to consider and respond to potential stakeholders, I did not explicitly show them how such books might be read to and discussed with youth. While I'm hopeful pre-service teachers would transfer other more general strategies we explored (e.g., conducting interactive read-alouds), additional resources such as video samples, empirical studies providing glimpses into actual elementary classrooms, guest speakers, and classroom visits could all help to increase their capacity.

Such a multifaceted approach emphasizes the importance of centering expansive and critical topics across not only a semester in a single children's literature course, but throughout teacher education programs of study. While the number of topics, strategies, and discussion to incorporate may seem extensive—and teacher educators might wonder how to balance such practices along with everything else they are teaching—not providing a multifaceted approach would limit pre-service teachers' capacity to address the needs of their future students.

I frequently wonder as a teacher educator, "What else can I do to support pre-service teachers for their future classrooms?" However, I also reflect on my own experiences as an undergraduate student being trained as a future teacher. Even if my children's literature instructor (or other teacher educators) had employed just the two strategies I described in this article—emphasizing windows and mirrors and considering stakeholder responses—I would have felt better equipped to read and facilitate dialogue with children's literature relevant to my students' lives when I was a classroom teacher. Thus, my goal as a teacher educator is to provide the PTs in my classes with experiences and strategies that will support them in ways I wish I had earlier known and that emphasize the expansiveness and criticality of such practices rather than their difficulty. I encourage other teacher educators to similarly consider the descriptors they use, seek and employ strategies that support pre-service teachers' capacities, and continue to share their efforts to promote expansive and critical conversations via children's literature in classrooms.

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### About the Author



**Stephen Adam Crawley** is an assistant professor of literacy education at Oklahoma State University. His research, teaching, and service focus on culturally diverse children's literature, censorship, technology integration, and content area literacy in K-8 classrooms. Specifically, he explores depictions within, approaches to the teaching of, and stakeholders' responses to LGBTQ-inclusive children's literature. Prior to teacher education, he taught in Australian and U.S. public elementary schools for 12 years. His research is published in *Voices from the Middle*, *The ALAN Review*, *The Journal of Children's Literature*, *Bookbird*, and *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*.



# Conversations About Death That Are Provoked by Literature

*Cara E. Furman*

In an article on nurturing caring relationships in the literacy classroom, Mary Amanda Stewart (2016) writes, “In my office I have a picture that reminds me the priority is the people we teach—not content, assessments, or compliance” (p. 22). She reminds teachers that as we teach content such as literacy, it is the meaning that students take from this content, the opportunities the skills afford, and the quality of the experience that matter most. In this paper, I take up one small element of what it means to nurture caring relationships in the classroom and to put the student’s humanity first: namely, having difficult and unplanned conversations about death.

## Story and Sense-Making

It is something of a truism that stories help people make sense of and cope with life and therefore, are an important part of early childhood education (Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Engel, 1995; Meier, 2009). Stories help people to learn about others and support the development of empathy (Nussbaum, 1997), construct and reinforce identities (Bruner, 1986; Engel, 1995), determine how to act in difficult situations (Nussbaum, 1992), and work through emotional experiences, including trauma (Bettelheim, 1989; Koplrow, Dean, & Blachley, 2018; Paley, 2005). Therefore, picture books as a popular form of sharing stories with children are powerful teaching tools for social-emotional learning (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004; Handy, 2017; Husbye et al., 2019; Mankiw & Strasser, 2013).

Sometimes an adult chooses a particular book to introduce or address a difficult topic. Yet, in my experience as an elementary school teacher and teacher educator, difficult and meaningful conversations about death tend to be unplanned and sparked unintentionally. This paper investigates these unplanned conversations with an eye towards supporting teachers.

## Phenomenological Inquiry

Phenomenology is a mode of human science research that accounts for the nuances and complexities of lived experience (van Manen, 2016). Unlike an ethnographic study that might collect extensive data to make claims about how a culture handles a particular issue, in phenomenological qualitative research, one focuses narrowly on the particular. The nuances and details of the particular then reveal truths. Truth is measured by assessing whether the data offers resonant insights into the human condition. Validity is determined insofar as the revelations support practice. In phenomenological research, one revisits what was done in the service of doing better in the future.

One mode of inquiry is to analyze anecdotes for themes (van Manen, 2016). In this paper, I turn to a series of anecdotes (which I refer to as events) that feature conversations on death that arose unexpectedly after reading a piece of literature. Events 1 and 3 are drawn from detailed journal accounts taken at the time; 2 and 4 are from memory; and 5 is scaffolded by notes in my plan book. Van Manen (2016) writes, “we are less concerned with the factual accuracy of an account than with the plausibility of an account—whether it is true to our living sense of it” (p. 65). As such, I have described each event in depth—trying to capture how it influenced my instruction. Names and identifying details have been changed.<sup>1</sup>

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1 I am grateful to the students throughout my career who have persisted in making these conversations part of the curriculum.

## Monologues about Death in Response to Children's Literature

I begin with a failed conversation.

### Event 1

As a new teacher, I was trying to read Faith Ringgold's *My Dream of Martin Luther King* (1995) with Tanisha, a six-year-old who seemed distracted until we came to the page that depicts King in a casket. When she saw it, Tanisha kept repeating, "that Martin Luther King—he dead." In response, I tried to draw her attention to what I saw as Ringgold's message: King's philosophy and good works—his life, not his death. Tanisha was not interested in that agenda. She started to dance around the room with the book, pointing and singing, "dead, dead, dead." Only after I wrote about the situation in my journal that night did I begin to hear a child with something important to say about King and became aware that I had missed it. I had missed something important about the book's meaning and, more importantly, about what was meaningful to Tanisha.

An educator who has written extensively on addressing trauma with young children, Elizabeth Dutro (2008), shares a moment from the student perspective. Dutro describes reading Karl Shapiro's poem, *Auto Wreck*, in high school soon after her younger brother had died:

I heard the word *ambulance*; I saw it on the page in front of me, the stark black print beginning to waver, along with the words that followed—*stretchers, mangled, hospital*. A slight tremble in my fingers spread quickly to a more general quaking. Just a few lines of verse and I was unable to hold my pencil, unable to focus on the page or my classmates' faces, each blurring into the other. At the poem's ninth line I bolted from the classroom, unsure how I had managed to will my trembling limbs to move, and only slightly aware of the pause in my teacher's reading. I ran, to some deserted locker-lined corridor, to escape the words that had too soon spoken my experience back to me. (p. 423)

Dutro then draws on trauma theory to encourage teachers to bear witness to children's traumas in the classroom. She characterizes witnessing as a multi-part process in which one makes space for student's testimony, and welcomes this testimony by first hearing and then offering testimony of one's own. In doing so, she considers how she might "re-vision [her own] classroom as a space of testimony and witness" in order to honor and care for the students (p. 424).

A conversation demands a back and forth between two people around a shared subject (Furman, 2019a). Dutro's call for witnessing in response to testimony can be characterized as conversation. Within this frame, my moment with Tanisha was a failure to engage in conversation.

### Difficult Conversations About Death

In contrast, I offer the following events as examples of conversations—rather than monologues.

### Event 2

My high school was the kind of place where had I been escaping to the hall to cry, I'd likely be asked for a hall pass. A place where, to return to the opening quote, "content, assessments, or compliance" generally took precedent over humanity (Stewart, 2016, p. 22). From this sterile setting, I remember little. One period of English has travelled with me, though. We were reading Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. We were typically asked to respond to books by filling out summaries or answering multiple-choice questions, largely about

the plot but sometimes about literary conventions. I do not know what we typically spoke about in class. I also do not know who or what started the conversation that day but what I am sure of is that we suddenly veered away from Charles Dickens. People shared personal stories about death and cried. I didn't share but I had recently lost my grandfather and I remember feeling disoriented by the conversation (was this really happening in my impersonal school?) but also appreciative. After the conversation had gone on for some time, it came to a natural close. The teacher then turned the class over to the student teacher. From the open second-floor window, we could smell cigarette smoke. We had often seen our teacher smoking between classes. But I was both bemused and understanding when I smelled the smoke—recognizing that this conversation had moved her just as it had us.

### **Event 3**

It was early September in my first- and second-grade classroom. I had read Patricia Polacco's (1988) *The Keeping Quilt* to launch a writing activity. Children had been asked to describe a family memento for homework and to use this memento to launch personal narratives in writer's workshop. The scene unfolds as excerpted from my teaching journal:

We talked about death for half an hour. I read them *The Keeping Quilt* to talk about family stories and ways of keeping track of stories. I showed them my ring and said it came from my grandfather when my grandmother died and it helps me remember her. I ask the kids if they have something from their family that is special and has a story. Sol has a blanket. Someone's mom has a ring that she got from her mother. Israel asks, "Why do people have to die? I hate death." I am stopped in my tracks. Decide that I will not ignore the comment and say, "Well it's a part of life. It's a sad thing but it's okay. We miss people but it's okay." Hands go up and I decide to see what the class wants to talk about.

Over the course of the next half hour, the children gave testimony and witnessed in response to Israel's comment. Stories of dead pets sat beside those about relatives. Humor was mixed in with tears.

The experience made me nervous. I wrote, "I worry all day. What have I done? What have I let happen?" I talk to the principal about whether I should send home a note to parents. I draft one but ultimately do not send it because, as I wrote, "They [my students] seem settled at the end of the day. Isa tells her mom [about our discussion] and tells her I have had a hard day."

I was left unsettled, concluding the entry:

The day weighs on me. I tell the story again and again [to friends and colleagues], making it humorous but Christopher's sobs and the sad faces weigh on me. I can't fix it. All I can do is distract. They are distractible though. Maybe that's life. All we can do is distract.

### **Flouting Conventions of Literacy Instruction**

A phenomenological approach has the researcher analyze for themes that will improve practice going forward. To this end, I look at what happened (and didn't happen) in the events I've described to better understand how teachers might facilitate conversations about death.

I want to begin by framing the issue. I am an experienced and confident teacher and I find having these conversations incredibly hard. Dutro (2008) stresses that typically conversations about death are unplanned. Thus, the teacher is challenged both by the content and by the lack of preparation. Dutro describes a child's

repeated, and initially missed, attempt to discuss her experiences of loss in a book group. Dutro (2008) writes of crying as she later listened to the transcript of that discussion:

[M]y tears were for the stories that were eventually told and those left untold. I wept also for the long minutes that passed before Chrissie found her witnesses. Reading through the transcripts of that conversation, Chrissie's initial silencing is deafening. In the first half of our conversation she repeatedly tried to gain the floor and was repeatedly ignored. (p. 429)

Dutro is an experienced teacher who, because of her research, commitments, and personal experiences is especially alert to and prepared for conversations about death. Yet, even for her, the spontaneity and challenge of the topic led to difficulty responding.

John Dewey (2007) holds that we are shaped by our experiences. Over time, we habituate responses based on daily conduct. In analyzing these three events, I find that having the difficult conversation required going against three ingrained habits in contemporary literacy instruction: close reading, staying on task, and appropriate school talk.

### Close Reading

Contemporary reading instruction emphasizes close reading, a task in which one focuses only on the text to locate meaning (Corson, 2019; Eppley, 2019). As characterized by Karen Eppley (2019), the Common Core Teaching Standards actually equate reading with close reading. Teachers are admonished to make sure interpretation stays within the “four corners of the text” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4; Eppley, 2019, p. 343). A Common Core Unit on the Gettysburg Address mandates that questions that might place the text historically are “misleading” and can “rob precious class time for students and teachers” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 19; Eppley, 2019, p. 343). Personal responses, characterized as “opinions, appraisals, or interpretations,” are seen as distracting the student from the text (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 10; Eppley, 2019, p. 343).

An emphasis on staying within the confines of the text is neither unique to the Common Core nor new. Offering a more comprehensive approach, Louise Rosenblatt (1994) argues that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text. The text gives us certain directions about the nature of the transaction but background information, the reader's past experiences, values, and personality all influence the reading as well. Even within this more expansive view, much of the textual influence Rosenblatt describes comes from something akin to close reading.

I teach close reading and see it as an important avenue for listening to a text. My concern is not the practice but the overreliance on it. Each event I've described included a transaction that was not a close reading and in fact drew very loosely from textual cues.

*My Dream of Martin Luther King* is an optimistic story depicting a philosopher, leader, and symbol of racial integration. King's death is technically part of the book—he is shown in a casket and his death is covered in several pages of text. However, King's life and his message are the main themes of the book. *A Tale of Two Cities* is full of death but, in my read, the deaths are chiefly symbolic and don't always elicit a personal connection. *The Keeping Quilt* is a poetic description of a quilt that is passed from one generation to the next within a growing family. Amidst births and celebrations, death is mentioned on just one page. Yet each of these texts provoked a desire to talk about death.

### ***Staying On Task***

Conventional wisdom is that teachers should follow their lesson plans (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019). Time away from the teacher's pre-planned lesson is often billed as time wasted and a distraction from conveying the content of a lesson (Lemov, 2010). In extreme forms, staying on task means following a scripted lesson developed by someone else. In less rigid contexts, such as those in which I've taught, the norm is still to have a plan book in hand and follow it. Where adjustments occur, they tend to be small maneuvers, not total about-ships. As Dewey (1916/1944) writes, teachers typically have an end target in mind even if the route there shifts. As an experienced teacher, pre-determined plans (that sometimes account for the most minute details) are essential to the work I do. What I challenge is an over-reliance on plans that interferes with being responsive.

When Tanisha brought up King's death, my focus was on decoding and comprehension. I felt pressure to teach Tanisha to read and to stay on task. In Event 2, I believe the goal was to make sense of the plot and to analyze literary devices. We rarely went outside "the four corners" of the text. In fact this made *A Tale of Two Cities* extremely confusing because, without a background context on the French revolution, it was very hard to understand. Responding to emotional pulls of the text was definitely not part of the curriculum. Moving from the text to the personal was a dramatic and in my memory singular straying from my teacher's lesson.

With *The Keeping Quilt*, my class was supposed to focus on the passing down of the quilt to prepare to write about their own mementos. My plan to model an approach to writing and then send the children into writing workshop was interrupted by a whole morning devoted to the children's emotional needs—first with the conversation about death and then with giving them a collaborative free choice time for self-care.

### ***Appropriate School Talk***

Going off script goes beyond leaving the lesson plan behind. Teachers operate in a culture quick to label a broad range of topics, including trauma, as too much information (TMI) (Dutro, 2017). In fact, a narrow field of conversational topics are deemed appropriate school talk (Jones, 2012).

As an example of this kind of emotional gatekeeping, even the champion of affective reading, Rosenblatt (1994) limits appropriate affective responses. Responding to a quote by the poet Auden, she is quick to assure that Auden "does not necessarily condone irresponsible emotionalism in the reading of the poet's words" (p.45). The suggestion is that for Rosenblatt, and it seems she would hope for Auden too, emotion is welcome but only when it is handled responsibly. By responsibly, Rosenblatt seems to mean constrained, explaining, "I am especially concerned to dispel the notion that insistence on the reader's contributions produces 'sheer affectivism,' a preoccupation with emotion as opposed to thought, with the affective as opposed to the cognitive" (p. 44). One may emote in response to a poem but ought not to let the emotions overly preoccupy or interfere with reason. Habituated into this orientation, Stephanie Jones (2012) argues that students might be encouraged to theorize abstractly about feelings but not to grapple with emotions publicly.

Tanisha wanted to bring death into the conversation about Martin Luther King but I tried to refocus her to a more abstract discussion of his ideals. I can't speak to how my high school teacher felt about emotion in school except to say that aside from that class, I don't remember any personal sharing. When my class of first and second graders swerved to discuss death, my notes record that "I am stopped in my tracks. Decide

that I will not ignore the comment.” In choosing to “not ignore the comment,” a topic that is often silenced is heard in my classroom. That said, I did this with hesitation, initially responding to the children with a platitude that dismissed an emotional response: “Well it’s a part of life. It’s a sad thing but it’s okay. We miss people but it’s okay.”

My students pushed pass my insistence that it was “okay” and took off, discussing death with emotion and I, reluctantly, followed their lead. At the end of the day, I was exhausted with worry that I had not handled things correctly or had overstepped into unacceptable school talk.

### **Confirmation**

Supporting difficult conversations about death is important for teachers seeking to care for young children (Dutro, 2008, 2017; Jones, 2012). What does it mean for a teacher to violate the norms? In each of these cases, the teacher was uncomfortable, and in my case, resistant to talking about death. Dutro (2008) describes her own slow uptake when a group of children wanted to talk about death after reading about an orphan. Other teachers have reported that even after taking courses about talking about death with children or accumulating resources because they want to have the conversations, they find themselves avoiding the topic (Husbye, Buchholz, Powell, & Zanden, 2019).

A variety of experiences supported my willingness to follow the children’s lead in Event 3, but I was influenced by the memory of my high school teacher stopping class to have the difficult conversation. I was also influenced by my realization that I had missed an opportunity to be in conversation with Tanisha. Even after facilitating the conversation in Event 3 in which there was both testimony and witness, I concluded that an appropriate response was something entirely different from what we had done, commenting that “all we can do is distract.”

Educational philosopher Nel Noddings (1986) speaks to the importance of confirmation in education: having one person notice and affirm important aspects of another. She writes:

As we work, talk, and debate together, we begin to perceive the ethical ideals that each of us strives toward. Then we are in a position to confirm—to help the other to actualize that best image. (p. 502)

Like witnessing, confirmation demands that we both listen and then respond to another person. Noddings argues that when we provide confirmation, we not only help people to have their experience acknowledged but to also grow into the “best image” of themselves.

In my remaining two events, I highlight confirmation and share ideas for helping other teachers prepare for the challenge of difficult conversations about death in response to children’s literature.

### **Event 4**

I included the journal entry about the *The Keeping Quilt* in my dissertation. Arguing that storytelling provides a useful convention for talking about the complexity of teaching practice, I used the entry as an example of a teacher story. One of my thesis readers, Celia Genishi,<sup>2</sup> is an early childhood educator. She is a careful, attentive, reader—one who largely stayed within the bounds of my text. Yet, at the end of the defense, she commented on the power of the journal entry and said, “You may not be able to answer this yet, but I

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2 My gratitude to Celia for her comments and permission to share this story.

wonder how you will use this entry in your work with future teachers.” As she predicted, I did not have an answer at the time but it is one of the only comments I recall from my defense. I take the comment as a suggestion that I must use this entry somehow with future teachers, and so I do.

After processing Genishi’s comments, my feelings about Event 3 shifted. I lost some of my anxiety about whether talking about death with my students was appropriate. I was bolstered by her suggestion that not only was it appropriate, but it is also something I should model for future teachers. Genishi gave me permission to talk about death in school.

All of which leads me to the most recent event.

### **Event 5**

We were midway through the semester and my students, pre-service teachers, had just read a packet of stories dictated by toddlers to their teachers, who wrote them down. We were working on a close study of a story—first acting it out (inspired by Vivian Paley, 2005) and then describing the writing line by line (Furman, 2019b). My goal was to showcase how much can be learned about a piece of writing through close study of the text. The students began by identifying conventions such as the word “he repeats” and noting word choices such as “then.” My usually detailed notes then conclude abruptly with the word “dead.”

The rest of the class is seared in memory. One student, Jane, commented that the children’s stories seemed fixated on death. I dismissed the comment as off-task because it was not descriptive. I suggested that sometimes children write about violent experiences without any experience of violence (Roosevelt, 1998) and encouraged the class not to psychoanalyze. I tried to direct them back to descriptions of the writing. A few students followed my lead. Then Jane asked, “How do we address trauma in the classroom?” Her classmates followed her lead. I saw that this topic mattered to many of them and I gave in (albeit reluctantly). The remainder of the period was taken up with a circuitous and emotionally driven conversation about working with children who’ve experienced trauma, the student’s fears of mass shootings, and difficult conversations in general.

Again, I was uncomfortable, worrying that some students would be bored or annoyed with the fact that we had gone terribly off topic. Yet, as I scanned their faces and body language, I saw that everyone was riveted. I worried, just as I did with my first- and second-grade students, about not having good enough responses and that students would feel worse from our discussion.

Dutro (2008) argues that if students are to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with death, teachers must create invitations in the form of testimony in their curriculum. Testimony includes personal stories (such as telling about my grandmother’s ring in Event 3), published stories like *The Keeping Quilt*, and welcoming with witnessing the stories of students when they emerge. The effect is cyclical—the more stories there are, the more will come forth. Invited by the children’s stories they read, my pre-service teaching students gave testimony and I witnessed, and encouraged witnessing.

Since we teach the way we have learned, we must work with teachers as we hope they will work with students (Jones, 2012; Noddings, 1986). Dewey (1916/1948) argues that an educative experience is one in which we first do or undergo something and then reflect upon it. In keeping with this, Jones (2012) has students read about topics generally treated as inappropriate for school. In discussing these stories, Jones’ students both experience the value of reading these texts in class and prepare for how they will welcome more taboo topics when they are classroom teachers.

After the initial conversation in Event 5, I told my students how hard it was for me to stop class as I did and why I felt it was important. I then shared the journal entry featured in Event 3—connecting what we had done as a class to what I did with young children and again emphasizing how difficult this was for me. Finally, I offered readings that provided further resources on addressing death in schools. After this conversation, some students did independent reading on social-emotional learning, trauma, and school shootings. They learned both by undergoing an unexpected conversation about death and reflecting upon this conversation.

In stopping class with my pre-service teachers and spending extensive time on the topic, I also signaled that their students, not the content, were the priority in the classroom. In the course evaluation, a few noted the importance of that conversation, appreciating that I had stopped my lesson and, in their estimation, truly listened to what they wanted to talk about.

### Changing Teaching Practice

Each event featured a spontaneous engagement with a piece of literature. The spontaneity is key, but I've also found that certain teaching practices make it more likely that such conversations will occur. In closing, I offer a few suggestions to support teachers and teacher educators to create an environment that welcomes unexpected conversations about death. Specifically, these *actionable responses* subvert the habits of close reading, staying on task, and delineating appropriate school talk.

- **Close Reading.** I welcome and invite many ways to respond to texts, including acting them out, drawing a picture of how the text makes one feel, creating a collage of a favorite character with a one-line description of what the character is doing, and conducting student-led open-ended discussions where I do not speak. Students frequently respond to the same text using a variety of prompts of their choice (see Owocki, 2001, pp. 126-127). I also devote time to students' spontaneous discussions throughout the semester. All these actions, when reflected upon, expand the kind of reading that counts in my classroom and encourages us to choose close reading as one of many approaches.
- **Staying on Task.** I write the plan on the board for every class and almost always change this plan mid-class. When I make changes, I often ask students to reflect on why a teacher would do this. Other times, I explain my reasoning. I sometimes stop activities mid-way when they aren't going as planned and explain the problems I see with continuing with the original plan. Sometimes I invite students to help me come up with an alternative plan.
- **Appropriate School Talk.** In classrooms where teachers give testimony—through their own stories and selected texts—students are more likely to feel their own stories are welcome (Dutro, 2019). I now begin the semester telling students about my own experience with cancer. I explain that this revelation is not typically something I share with people I don't know, but that I am telling them because I am sure that some people in our class are experiencing something difficult right now and I want all of us to hold space for the reality that people may be grappling with hardship and loss.

I am hard pressed to think of a class I've taught (with children or adults) where there was not at least one conversation about death. Now, however, after laying the groundwork described in this section, I find my students are better prepared to engage meaningfully with each other and I am better able to follow their lead when difficult topics emerge.

Will my pre-service teachers welcome conversations about death when they become teachers? I cannot say for sure, just as I cannot ensure that anything I teach will be picked up later. What I can say is that I now



treat spontaneous conversations about death as an official part of the curriculum, sitting alongside phonics, close reading, and letter formation. Although I do not know what day they will occur, I plan for the fact that they will occur and, when they do, I will stop, witness, and then have the class reflect upon what we have done and undergone together.

A final word for those who skeptically query whether this is really literacy instruction. These conversations about death have changed me and changed my understanding of literature. When I open any of the books I mentioned, I remember the conversations about death and know that the text is enriched for these associations. Years ago, I missed an important opportunity for a meaningful conversation with Tanisha. I hope that in sharing my story that other teachers will be better prepared when similar events arise in their own classrooms.

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## About the Author



**Cara E. Furman, PhD**, is an assistant professor of literacy education at the University of Maine at Farmington. Prior to this, she was an urban public elementary school teacher. Published in journals, such as *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Education and Culture*, *Educational Theory*, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, and *Teachers College Record*, her research focuses on teacher development as it intersects with Descriptive Inquiry, inquiry, asset based inclusive teaching, and progressive literacy practices. Having studied both philosophy and education, she integrates qualitative research on classroom practice, teacher research, and philosophy. She is the co-director of the Summer Institute on Descriptive Inquiry and co-leads inquiry groups for local teachers. She can be reached at [cara.furman@maine.edu](mailto:cara.furman@maine.edu).

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Kristin Freda, Director of Library Services,  
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