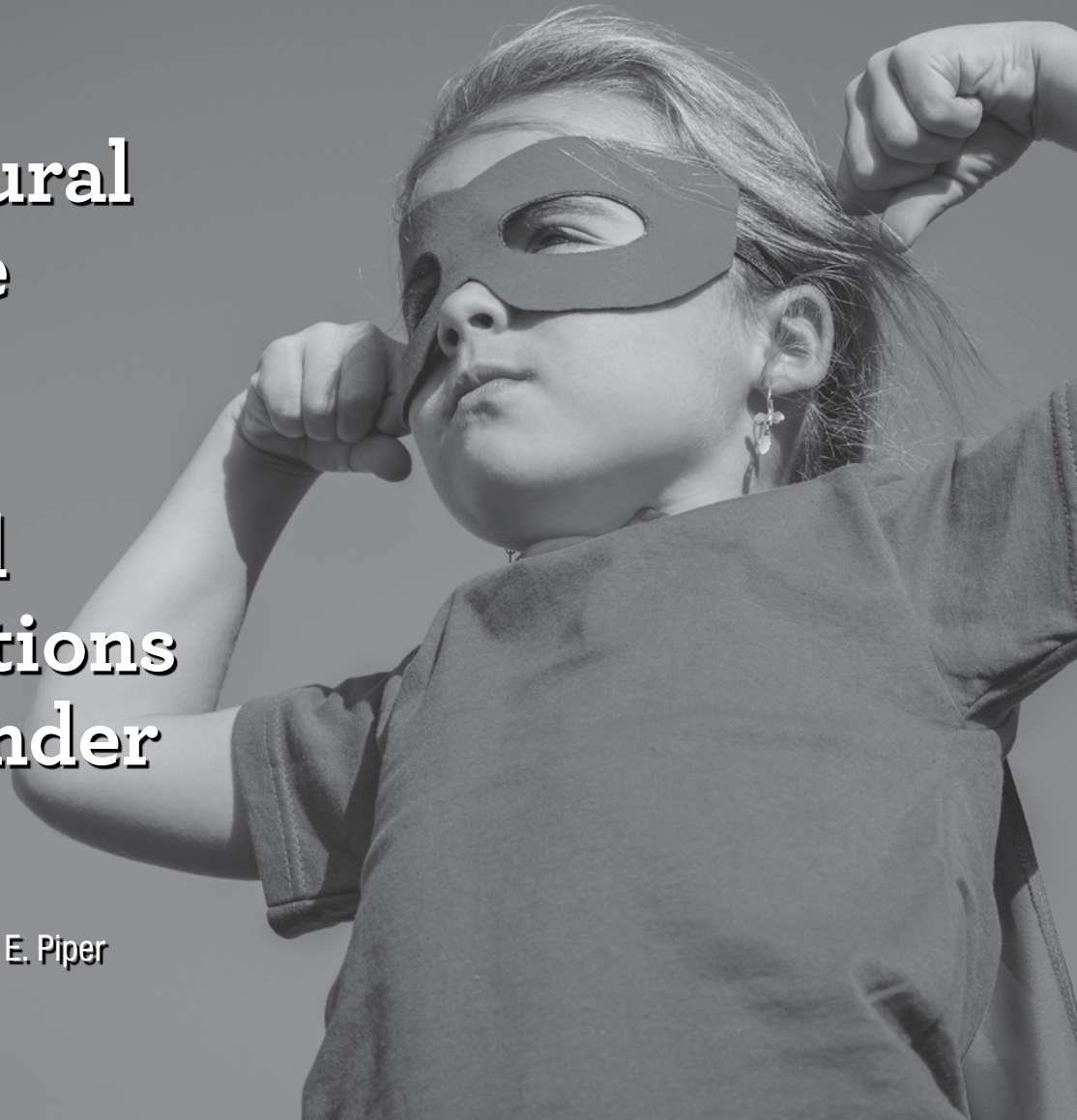


Using Multicultural Literature to Engage Students in Critical Conversations About Gender Identity



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Abstract: Gender identity is influenced by a variety of characteristics, including race, social class, sexual orientation, language, and gender. This article explores the importance of critical literacy, critical pedagogy, and the influence on identity development. Furthermore, it seeks to provide practitioners and teacher educators with an understanding of the importance of introducing school-aged children to diverse multicultural literature and facilitating critical conversations to increase awareness around topics of gender identity.

Keywords: gender identity, multicultural literature, critical literacy, dialogue



Ms. Ryan is a kindergarten teacher in a suburban part of the southern-most part of the United States. Having been in the classroom for the last three years, Ms. Ryan has gained new knowledge about the different subjectivities that influence her student's identity. However, this year she has taken a new approach and is listening to the children in her classroom to better understand their needs as they relate to identity development. This newfound approach stems from a conversation between two children prior to the morning meeting:

John: Ms. Ryan, yesterday me and my sister played dress up and I got to wear her princess dress!

Melanie: Boys don't wear dresses (laughter). . . Did you hear that? John said he wore a dress (encouraging laughter).

John: When I am at home, I DO wear dresses and I play with my sister's dolls.

Melanie: That's funny. Boys don't play with dolls. Dolls are for girls.

Samantha: Yah, John, dolls are only for girls.

John: (upset) It's NOT funny! I can play dress up and play with dolls if I want to!

Ms. Ryan: Ok, we will talk about this another time, class. Let's start our morning meeting.

Later that afternoon, Ms. Ryan began to question how she approached the conversation between the children that morning. She wondered what she should have done differently to help John feel safe in the classroom. She considered how she could have handled Melanie and Samantha laughing and teasing John. She decided she must take a different approach to opening the morning meeting the following day. She knew that there was work to be done.

Conversations like this are common within education settings. For teachers, it is vital that they consider the different elements of identity and emphasize the importance of critical pedagogy and critical literacy with school-aged children to help them deconstruct messages in text, including conversations, as it relates to gender identity development. One method that is beneficial is examining the use of children's literature to introduce alternative gender representations. Multicultural literature allows for parents and teachers who interact with children to introduce texts to begin dialogue around critical conversations of gender identity.

Thinking about this topic more locally, one can consider the conversation during the 2017 Texas legislation which included dialogue around public schools and bathroom regulations which would allow students to use only the bathroom that matched that of their biological sex, as noted on their birth certificate. This poses challenges for children who identify as transgender and can potentially be problematic for children in schools. Schools are able to provide accommodations for children on a case by case basis, but it can be argued that is not enough. However, providing such accommodations does not truly allow for students to express their gender identity in schools. Preparing teachers to approach these critical conversations with all children can increase awareness and acceptance.

Brief Review of the Literature

In an effort to educate school-aged children, it is vital that they are exposed to a variety of multicultural themed literature. For the purposes of this work, multicultural literature is defined as literature that represents a group of individuals who have been marginalized or historically underrepresented. Specifically, literature that can be used as a means to combat homophobia—the irrational fear or hatred of LGBTQ individuals—through the exposure of a variety of themed children's literature. Adapted from the work of Freire (1970), Banks (2007), and Nieto (2012), and in an effort to prepare

teachers with the tools needed to explore children's literature, the following four areas can provide a guiding framework for teacher to discuss gender identity in the classroom: 1) identity development, 2) multicultural children's literature, 3) critical pedagogy, and 4) critical literacy.

Identity Development

Multiple factors exist that influence identity development including race, ethnicity, social class, language, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ability (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Gee (2000) suggests that identity is about "being recognized as a certain kind of person in a given context" (p. 99). As one of the most critical tasks for students, transitioning from childhood into adolescence is the development of their identity; thus, it is of paramount importance that educational experiences are designed with this in mind (Erikson, 1968).

Multicultural Children's Literature

Multicultural children's literature became prominent in the 1970s as a product of the multicultural education movement (Logan, Watson, Hood, & Lasswell, 2016). The multicultural education movement sought to allow historically marginalized voices to be heard and featured in school curriculum. Due to the historical nature of this time period, it was during the 1960s and 1970s that most of the multicultural children's literature was written by White authors about the lived experiences of African Americans and generally promoted negative stereotypes (Logan, Watson, Hood, & Lasswell, 2016). The first picture books that featured a gender nonconforming character was *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972) and *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (de Paola, 1979). Ten years later, in 1989, Lesléa Newman published *Heather Has Two Mommies* and in 1991, Michael Willhoite published *Daddy's Roommate*, two books that addressed same-sex co-parents. Each of these texts aimed to show that these parents are just like, and just as good as, heterosexual parents and to mirror families with same-sex co-parents (Epstein, 2014). Research argues that within the last 15 years, there has been a "dramatic increase" in the number of LGBTQ titles published (Epstein, 2014, p. 113). For example, one study of the Chicago Public Library System found that the 30 books in the "juvenile homosexuality fiction" section were nearly all from the 21st century, during the late 1990s and 2000s (Epstein, 2014). While these texts are becoming more available through publication, it is vital that the authenticity and implementation are consistent.

In classrooms today, it is encouraged that teachers be prepared to approach critical conversations as students enter classrooms curious about civil right issues that are significantly affecting students and families today (Piper, 2017). Worthy, Chamberlain, Peterson, Sharp, & Shih (2012), however, document that educational spaces for students to have open-ended conversation around literature are rare in PK-12 schooling. Though multicultural children's literature can facilitate the introduction of diversity topics to classroom conversations, teachers must still facilitate meaningful dialogue around these topic areas if this literature is to enable them to realize culturally responsive teaching practices and garner improvements in all students' learning outcomes. Engaging children with multicultural literature fosters critical discussion of broad ranges of diverse topics and approaches these topics in age-appropriate ways, thus broadening student perspectives on, and understandings of, society and their important place in it; when this happens, teachers have become culturally responsive educators who can and do affirm all students.

Critical Pedagogy

Accordingly, multicultural perspectives must become part of both teaching and learning processes, reflected in both pedagogy and content (Banks, 2007; Delpit, 2012; Nieto, 2010). Defined as critical pedagogy, the practice first gained attention internationally with the publication and first English edition of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970 (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Critical pedagogy promotes understanding of diverse forms of oppression, including class, race, sexual orientation, cultural, religious, and ability-related dimensions of oppression. This understanding, in turn, provides educational researchers with the ability to discern connections to societal power structures, including education, and human oppression, including that of students in public schools in the United States. Additionally, critical pedagogy promotes an understanding of how issues of power and oppression are embodied in everyday human life experiences, and, therefore, provides a basis for questioning various ideologies and related decisions, and the dominance relations they protect (Kincheloe, 2008). Critical pedagogy is practiced in varying contexts around the world. In education, educator critical consciousness must exist before critical pedagogy can be enacted. Gay and Kirkland (2003) explained that teachers who know who they are culturally, understand the sociopolitical contexts in which they teach, and can recognize and question how their assumptions and prior knowledge may impact the students they teach to possess critical consciousness and leverage that consciousness in developing critical pedagogical practice. When teaching is coupled with critical self-reflection there is constant transformation and improvement of self and one's teaching reality (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Howard, 2006). This task is not simple for teachers. Too often, classroom teachers focus on the dominant ideologies; which often align to their own interests.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is related to critical pedagogy and the social justice work of Paulo Freire (2000). Freire's work brought change to poverty-stricken areas in Brazil through a movement that empowered poor and otherwise disenfranchised adults to question social structures that conditioned them to remain in disempowered spaces. Literacy education was the first key factor enabling these adults to begin to face, question, and challenge the status quo (Stevens & Bean, 2007). But mere literacy—functional literacy—was not enough to bring about transformational change. Additionally, Freire and Macedo (1987) argue that literacy education should not only provide basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills, but it must also be characterized by "a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people" (p. 187). They argue that true literacy is reflected in the ability to read "the word and the world" (p. 8). From these ideas, the concept of critical literacy formally emerged. A critical literacy framework encourages teachers to reconsider literacy instruction as "problem posing" education, where the relationships between hegemony, power, and literacy are questioned, at the same time that literacy skills are being taught and learned (Freire, 1970). All children benefit educationally from rich opportunities—especially those that use a critical literacy framework—for gaining knowledge about diverse cultures in the context of exploring ideas of power and agency that provide opportunities for questioning and acting to reconcile injustices (Fisher & Serns, 1998; Freire, 1970; Stevens & Bean, 2007).

Children’s Literature That Introduces Topics of LGBTQ

Similar to the conversation in Ms. Ryan’s classroom, children’s curiosities lead to further questions from their peers. While some teachers may be equipped to facilitate discussion around the topic of gender identity, others may shy away from the topic in fear that their own perspective and beliefs will be revealed.

Using the four-point framework of identity development—context of education, multicultural children’s literature, critical pedagogy, and critical literacy—let’s see how Ms. Ryan can use a reflective process to prepare for her next morning meeting.

Ms. Ryan reflects on the conversation that took place earlier in the day. Ahe considers the classroom setting and expectations of her administration. Feelings of anxiety overcome her thought process as she prepares the lesson for tomorrow’s morning meeting. Was it “appropriate” to share the read aloud story she chose? Would her administration allow her to have a critical conversation about gender identity? Could she discuss topics of gender identity in her classroom? Were the kids old enough to have these conversations? In spite of the discomfort, Ms. Ryan, refers to the professional standards of the International Literacy Association (2018). Standard 4 specifically

emphasizes the importance of teachers demonstrating knowledge of diversity and equity by being knowledgeable about research, theory, pedagogies, and concepts which create classrooms that are inclusive and affirming for all children. Suddenly, her anxious feelings become the inspiration to create a meaningful lesson for her kindergarten students the next day. She has an obligation to teach these young children.

Ms. Ryan begins the morning meeting with a read aloud of Jacob’s New Dress. Using a critical literacy lens, she notes questions throughout the read aloud that give opportunity for children to engage in discussion with one another and the whole group. For example, what does Emily do when Christopher makes fun of Jacob for choosing girls clothes at the dress up center? Have you ever been bullied because of a choice you made? Have you ever bullied others because of a choice they made? When you hear the word “acceptance,” what does it mean to you? As the children answered the questions, Ms. Ryan follows up with discussion and connection to their own classroom experiences to make the critical conversation relevant.

Because Ms. Ryan understands that identity development is taking place within the kindergarten classroom, she uses her own background knowledge to discuss multiculturalism and provide examples of

Table 1

Title	Author	Grade Levels	Summary	Using This Text
<i>Jacob’s New Dress</i>	Sarah Hoffman and Ian Hoffman	PK-2	Jacob enjoys playing with his friend Emily. He particularly likes to play dress up because he gets to dress like a princess. The other kids in Jacob’s class tease him for wearing dresses because they believe boys can’t wear dresses. Jacob’s teacher helps the other children understand that all children can wear what makes them comfortable. Jacob’s teacher and parents are supportive in helping Jacob find his true identity	<p style="text-align: center;">Read Aloud and Dialogue</p> <p>Consider the following questions:</p> <p>What does Emily do when Christopher makes fun of Jacob for choosing girls clothes at the dress up center?</p> <p>Jacob’s mood and expressions change during this story. Why does he start to feel happier towards the end of the story?</p> <p>What does acceptance mean to you? Have you ever been bullied by someone like Christopher? Have you ever been the bully and teased someone else?</p>
<i>I Am Jazz</i>	Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings	PK-3	Based on the real-life story of a transgender child, this story recounts a young child’s gender transition. From two years old, Jazz Jennings knew that she had a girl’s brain in a boy’s body. She liked the color pink, dancing, makeup, and dress up. Initially, her family was confused as they had always thought of her as a boy. Then, one day Jazz’s parents took her to a doctor who said that Jazz was transgender and was born that way. Jazz’s parents supported her and reminded her that being different but the same is in fact possible.	<p style="text-align: center;">Writing Activity</p> <p>Consider Jazz’s experiences as a student in school. What are some ways that you could advocate and help Jazz find her place in the school?</p> <p>As a student in Jazz’s class, write a letter to her expressing your feelings or thoughts towards her bravery to be herself.</p>
<i>George</i>	Alex Gino	5-7	At school, students look at George and they see a boy. But she knows that she’s not a boy—she’s a girl. In fact, she believes she will have to keep this secret from everyone forever. When her teacher announces that the class play will be <i>Charlotte’s Web</i> , George is certain that she wants to audition for the role of Charlotte. However, the teacher says she can’t try out for that role because she’s a boy. George and his best friend Kelly set out to design a plan so she can be Charlotte and to show everyone who she truly is.	<p style="text-align: center;">Literature Circle</p> <p>Using the literature circle format, provide different scenarios from the text that allow opportunities for your students to think critically about how George was feeling based on her interactions with others in the class.</p>
<i>Luna</i>	Julie Anne Peters	9-12	Narrated by Regan, Liam’s younger sister, this story introduces you to the high school senior, Liam. At night, Liam transforms into Luna, playing dress up and wearing makeup with Regan. As her protector and only confidante, Regan does all she can to keep Luna from the cruelty of the world around. However, as Luna prepares to emerge it is evident that her family and friends are showing feelings of anxiety to accept the transition.	<p style="text-align: center;">Writing Activity</p> <p>Write a letter to Liam from Regan. Identify three main points that you want Liam to know.</p> <p>As Luna, write a letter to your family describing your feelings towards this transition. Address the fears and feelings of anxiety that have overcome you during this time.</p>

differences and acceptance. She prepares artifacts that describe who she is, and she allows students to reflect and ask questions in an effort to learn more about one another. Using a critical pedagogical approach with these young children provides opportunity for Ms. Ryan to use life experiences or in this case, classroom experiences to introduce issues of oppression, a task that many teachers avoid. Ms. Ryan ends the morning meeting with the following statement:

Ms. Ryan: Yesterday, friends in our classroom went home with hurt feelings. I went home with hurt feelings. Today, we talked about how we are each different and why each of our feelings needs to be respected. In our classroom, everyone is safe to be who he or she is because in this classroom, we celebrate one another.

To promote further the need for diverse literature in classrooms, a selection of texts has been provided for teachers and teacher educators to use to introduce and facilitate critical conversations around gender identity. Making these texts available, implementing critical conversations, and approaching these topics through using the four-point framework is just the beginning of preparing teachers and students to create social change.

While Table 1 provides a brief summary and examples of activities, Table 2 includes additional texts that can be used as resources across grade levels.

Table 2

Title	Author	Grade Level
<i>Sparkle Boy</i>	Lesléa Newman	PK-2
<i>Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress</i>	Christine Baldacchino	PK-1
<i>Stella Brings the Family</i>	Miriam Schiffer	K-2
<i>Introducing Teddy: A Gentle Story About Gender and Friendship</i>	Jess Walton	PK-1
<i>My Princess Boy</i>	Cheryl Kilodavis	PK-3
<i>10,000 Dresses</i>	Marcus Ewert	K-4
<i>Red: A Crayon's Story</i>	Michael Hall	PK-3
<i>The Boy in the Dress</i>	David Walliams	4-7
<i>Annie on My Mind</i>	Nancy Garden	7-9
<i>The Great American Whatever</i>	Tim Federle	9-12
<i>It's Not Like It's a Secret</i>	Misa Sugiura	9-12

Conclusion

Identity is influenced by multiple conditions, including home-based cultural understandings and societal norms. Erikson (1968) noted that a child's healthy identity development from childhood to adolescence is vital to his or her academic success and success in society. When teachers introduce a variety of multicultural literature, it allows children to consider experiences of others and provides diverse perspectives to which they can relate. Simply introducing this type of literature is not enough, however. Teachers can increase awareness and build tolerance as they facilitate dialogue and interactions with texts, allowing children to recognize how society impacts the ways that one's identity is developed, specifically as it relates to gender.

Adults are influential to a child's identity development. It is important to deconstruct the complex concepts and images that children have regarding identity as it is critical to ensuring their success in understanding topics of diversity. As the makeup of classroom demographics continue to change, it is essential that teachers are prepared to facilitate critical conversations in meaningful ways so that when individuals like Ms. Ryan reflect on their practice, they are confident in their approach to teach children about diversity and gender differences.

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