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# WOW STORIES

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INQUIRY INTO CRITICAL AND  
GLOBAL ISSUES THROUGH LITERATURE

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**WOW Stories: Volume V Issue 3**

*Opportunities for Inquiry into Critical and Global Issues through Literature*  
Fall 2017

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**Editor's Note:**

"I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship." (*Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott)

Natural disasters, racial conflicts, civil unrest, the threat of war--these are just some of the current events filling news cycles this month. As a teacher I have a natural desire to protect children from physical dangers, as well as knowledge of a troubled world. However, I have come to realize that despite my instincts, children at very young ages are not only aware of these issues, but many are directly impacted by them. Furthermore, children live in a plugged-in world, surrounded by media conveying images and stories about current events around the world in real time.

How do we provide children and adolescents with perspectives on these difficult truths and the issues they raise? Do we ignore them, making our classrooms neutral spaces devoid of disturbing conversations too challenging for young students to consider, or do we bring these issues into school spaces and create opportunities for students to constructively explore and expand their knowledge and understandings of these issues? Perhaps the more significant question to consider is how to help young learners navigate and process this constant exposure to troubling events and the complex issues such events raise for students.

This issue of *WOW Stories* highlights teachers and teacher educators who took on the challenge of addressing critical issues and difficult topics in the classroom. The four vignettes demonstrate how literature, careful planning, and an abiding trust in children's abilities to think critically about political, social, and global issues, present powerful opportunities for inquiry and reflection for both students and their teachers.

Kelly Cutler shares an inquiry into an exploration of race with first graders. Her vignette describes how she initiated these conversations using carefully selected literature and guiding questions to define topics around race that led to insightful observations and connections. Similarly, Hee Young Kim and Angelica Serrano explore how students in an elementary classroom visually read images in cultural texts with the goal of creating a critical visual literacy curriculum. Their collaborative inquiry found students recognized embedded racialized discourses in the illustrations of picture books through instruction on how to read visual elements.

The last two vignettes draw attention to the critical role the teacher plays in enacting engagement with critical issues through the authors' work with preservice teachers. Mary Fahrenbruck and Leanna Lucero describe how they engage preservice teachers with multicultural literature, providing explicit descriptions of instructional practices and links to resources they found effective in developing critical awareness of the diversity of students in their future classrooms. Likewise, S. Rebecca Leigh depicts her experiences using challenging texts with preservice teachers and presents a framework she adapted that provided opportunities for pre-service teachers to effectively use read alouds as part of their social justice pedagogy.

As an editor and teacher, I am inspired by these stories of hope, and encouraged by the powerful learning opportunities offered by meaningful engagements around literature. Like Amy from *Little Women*, I am less afraid to sail my ship into the storm (Alcott, 1832).

Alcott, Louisa May, (1832/2014). *Little Women*. New York: Puffin.

Tracy Smiles, Editor

## Critical Literacy: Engaging First Graders in an Exploration of Race through Children’s Literature

Kelly Cutler

As an educator, I often hear teachers suggest that young children are not “ready” to tackle controversial topics such as race, racism, and racial identity. Reasons are oftentimes stated, such as “that’s not developmentally appropriate” or “they’re too young to understand that concept.” In direct contrast, the last sixty years of educational research indicates that children do understand the concept of race at a very early age (Clark, 1988; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Goodman 1952; Katz, 2013; Proshansky, 1966). Yet often adults, including parents and educators, do not recognize children’s ability to understand race. Most teachers--particularly White teachers--have difficulty talking to children and educators about race and racism (Copenhaver, 2000; Glazer, 2003; Lewis, 2001; Pollock, 2004; Willis, 2003). As a result, many educators have adopted a color-blind mentality-- denying or minimizing the impact of race on an individual’s experiences--believing this is the most effective way to deal with race, racial inequities, and racial diversity in schools (Bakari, 2003; Banks, 2006; Husband, 2012; Milner, 2010; Modica, 2015).

So why does the silence around race in education matter? Although color-blindness might appear positive on the surface, in reality it has negative consequences for students when their racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences are widely ignored (Hawley & Nieto, 2010; Sleeter, 1996; Tatum, 1992). Further, since the 2016 presidential election, hate violence, as well as incidents of harassment that are racial in nature, are on the rise. The Southern Poverty Law Center (2017) refers to this rise in racially charged events as the “Trump Effect.” According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2017), 867 hate incidents were reported just in the first 10 days after the election, of which the majority occurred on university campuses or in K-12 schools. Pollock (2008) argues that educators need to talk directly with students about race and racial disparities-- specifically causes and solutions-- to eliminate disparities altogether.

As a result, I became curious about how elementary students experience lessons on race, racism, and racial identity. Using the children's books *The Colors of Us* (Katz, 2002), *Shades of People* (Rotner, 2009), *All the Colors We Are: The Story of How We Get Our Skin Color* (Kissinger, 2014), and *Skin Again* (hooks, 2004), I engaged first-grade students in conversations about defining race, racism, and their own racial identities. The literature was used as an entry point for engaging in the taboo topic of race. Steele and Cohn-Vargas (2013) point out that literature can be a means for providing an entrance for talking about all kinds of differences and creates possibilities for open-ended discussion about race and culture.

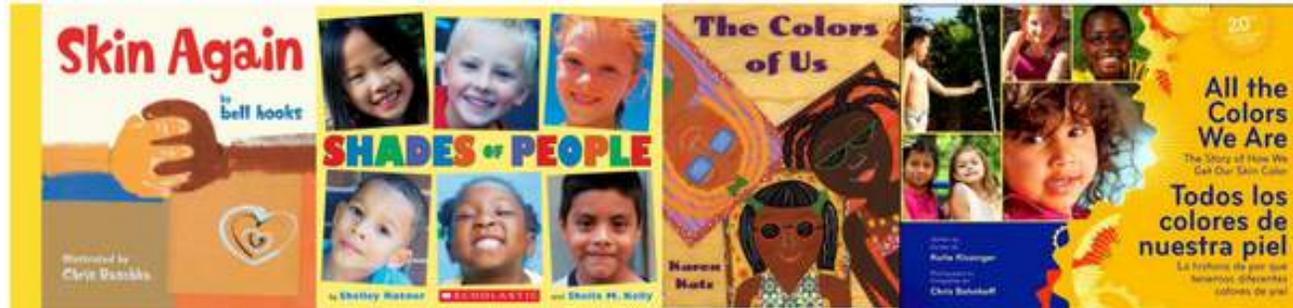


Figure 1: Children’s literature used for discussion about race.

### Context

The students were first graders attending an elementary school in a large metropolitan area in the western United States. The school demographics were: 39% White, 22% Latina/o, 19% Asian, 11% Black/African American, 7% Multiracial, 2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 1% Native American/Alaska Native. Approximately 73% qualified for free or reduced lunch, 44% received English language services, and 10% were receiving special education services. Fifteen of the 23 first-grade students participated in this project, which took place in their classroom over a period of four days. Although not all participated in the research study, all students did participate in activities. In this vignette, I will describe how the children’s literature was used and outline the lessons as students experienced them.

### What is Race?

Steele and Cohn-Vargas (2013) suggest that the primary role of educators is not to prevent discrimination, but instead to facilitate a process in which students get to know, respect, and depend on each other and to understand various points of view. Therefore, prior to beginning, I needed to take several steps to ensure the safety and facilitation of this project. First, to avoid a colorblind mentality, I needed to explicitly name “race” as a positive element in the classroom. The term race generally refers to a socially constructed group of people who are classified based on physical traits such as skin color and facial features (Banks & Banks, 2013; Tatum, 2003; Van den Berghe, 1967). For this purpose, I defined race as “one way to divide humans into groups based on skin color.” Second, I had to provide a safe environment, reminding students that talking about topics such as race can sometimes make us feel uncomfortable (even for adults). Third, it was vital that I centered discussions around the children’s literature to anchor the work. By directly teaching students about race, racism, and racial inequalities, students could be encouraged to think critically, interrogate power inequities, and combat bias and oppression (Cheng & Soudack, 1994; Kailin, 2002; Nieto & Bode, 2012).

At the start of each day of the four-day lessons, students and I would gather at the classroom carpet area and review the definition of race, saying together, “race is one way to divide humans into groups based on skin color.” Students also decided to add hand signals to our definitions, which required incorporating sign language. This community time provided students with a space to debrief any questions, comments,

or concerns. For example, one day a boy raised his hand and stated, “Is race like racism?” To which I replied, “Yes, but what do you know about racism?” He responded, “Well I know it is when you treat people real bad because of their skin color. That is what Dr. King was trying to fix but he didn’t finish it.” I smiled and acknowledged his comment, “Yes, yes, that is right, Dr. King was trying to make sure that everyone was treated equally regardless of skin color.”

The core of our discussions about race revolved around the children’s literature. The first book I read aloud was *The Color of Us* by Karen Katz (2002). This book focuses on the experiences of one girl, who through the influence of her mother, discovers that human skin color is all shades of brown. As she wanders through her neighborhood, the girl notices and names the skin colors around her. “Isabella is chocolate brown, like the cupcakes we had for her birthday. Lucy has skin that’s peachy and tan” (Katz, 2002, p. 7). While I was reading, I asked the students to notice the words used to describe skin colors. Afterwards we discussed the variety of adjectives the author used to characterize the skin colors of the characters in the story--honey, cinnamon, peanut butter, reddish brown, butterscotch, and french toast. I told students, “I identify as White, and my skin color is latte,” and encouraged them to consider their identities.

Students recreated their own skin color by mixing paints to determine their exact match (see Figure 2). As students were mixing paints for their skin colors, I drew them back to the story, *The Color of Us*, and asked them to imagine what they might want to name their skin color. Then, students used their skin color paint to begin the process of creating their own self-portraits.



Figure 2: Examples of students creating skin colored paints for self-portraits.

During the second lesson, I introduced to students to the book *Shades of People* by Shelley Rotner (2009). As this book was being read aloud, I asked students to not only notice the differing shades of skin tones, but to also notice the differences in hair color and texture, eye color and shape, as well as other facial features. After the read aloud, students discussed the various features, as I drew examples on an anchor chart for students to reference. Therein, students were asked to add hair and facial features to their own self-portraits (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Examples of students adding hair and facial features to their self-portraits.

### Racial Identity Statements

As the project went on, students began to ponder the question, does race equal skin color? In conjunction, by the third lesson I introduced students to the idea of racial categories, specifically the racial categories as they appear on the United States Census (see Figure 4). I invited students to consider what racial categories they might identify with and how these “boxes” match our definition of race which is socially constructed. Then, I read aloud *All the Colors We Are: The Story of How We Get Our Skin Color* by Katie Kissinger (2014), inviting students to listen for the three ways in which humans get their skin color (ancestors, sun, and melanin). Students were fascinated by the scientific word “melanin” and grappled with the notion that the more active your melanin is, the more likely you are to have darker skin tones. *All the Colors We Are* displays a world map which suggests that the closer your ancestors lived to the Earth’s equator, the more likely you are to have darker skin due to sun exposure.



Figure 4: Anchor charts used throughout the project for students to reference.

Also, during the third lesson, I asked students to consider their own racial identity and which category or categories they thought would match their race. In truth, many students did not know what racial category they would “fit” into, and relied upon their teacher and myself to check the census demographics that their families had selected upon school registration. In situations where students had multiple racial categories or multiple labels for one racial category, I asked students to self-select their racial category (for example selecting between Black and African American). Once students had self-selected their racial category, I invited students to write out their identity statement, therefore naming their racial category and skin color (I identify as \_\_\_\_\_ and my skin color is \_\_\_\_\_).

Students were able use the statement to identify themselves and choose how they wanted to be seen. The pairings were diverse and creative, with responses like:

"I identify as Asian and Black and my skin color is French cinnamon;" "I identify as Hispanic and my skin color is almond;" "I identify as white and my skin color is pink peach;" "I identify as African American and my skin color is ninja."

Each student began to understand that their skin color was multi-faceted and unique.

For the fourth lesson, I read aloud *Skin Again* by bell hooks (2004). In this book, hooks proclaims the importance of skin color as part of identity, but cautions that coloring is not all that we are. She writes:

The skin I'm in looks good to me. It will let you know one small way to trace my identity. But then again the skin I'm in will always be just a covering. It cannot tell my story. If you want to know who I am you have got to come inside.

I encouraged students to consider that their skin color cannot tell the whole story of who they are. As I held up my bare arm, I told students “For example, can you tell by looking at my skin that I have two dogs? Can you tell that I have three sisters? That I like latte's?” Students laughed at such a suggestion. I invited them to add more details to their self-portraits, including pictures or words that describe more of their identity beyond just skin color (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Examples of students adding details to their identity.

### Challenges to our inquiry

The major challenges of implementing this unit of study manifested prior to the interactions with students. Specifically, the adults in the community presented obstacles that needed to be resolved. First, the school principal requested that I allow him to preview all the material that would be used throughout the lessons, especially the children's books. After reviewing the materials and having several informal conversations with me, the principal gave his approval for the project. Next, students' families were given written consent forms to complete in conjunction with this research project. The classroom teacher distributed the forms as part of her regular communication with families and encouraged questions or concerns. A few families had questions, which were answered by communicating with the classroom teacher. One family decided not to have their child participate, to which the child told the teacher that her mom did not want her to talk about race. Finally, several other classroom teachers in the school began to interrogate the participating classroom teacher before the unit of study even began, questioning whether talking about race was developmentally appropriate for first graders. In my discussions with the classroom teacher before beginning the lessons, I supported her by giving several talking points to combat the critical comments and questions from her peers.

### Conclusion

The aim of this project was to engage first grade students thought to be too young to participate in lessons about race and racism. Through the collaborative discussions and culminating interviews, students readily recalled the definition of race and were

enthusied about learning about racial categories. One student stated, “I learned that it’s ok to have different skin color and that when you join other people it is nice.” Another student suggested, “I would say... everyone looks the same color as you, and some people do not like it when it’s not the same and they don’t feel comfortable unless they are with the same kind. We want to learn that other people should dance and be with them.”

Furthermore, a few students began to grapple with the definition of racism. One student noted, “Racism is like telling people that they can’t do something because of their skin color. “And another child commented, “Racist means like you... they’re like... they’re like to be with your own kind.” Through this project, these young children not only demonstrated that they were “ready” to tackle controversial topics such as race, racism, and racial identity, but they welcomed the idea. As noted by one student, “When I will be a teacher, I would do that with my class, too.”



Figure 6: Examples of completed student work.

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## Enhancing Critical Visual Literacy through Illustrations in a Picturebook

Hee Young Kim and Angelica Serrano

Picturebooks are a primary tool for teachers in classrooms. A picturebook consists of verbal text and visual images in illustrations. Many research studies have explored the importance of illustrations in picturebooks and in visual literacy instruction (Nikolajeva, 2012, 2013; Painter, Martin & Unsworth, 2014; Serafini, 2010; Sipe, 1998a, 1998b). Illustrations are not just an extension of the text that reinforce the meaning of words, but are necessary for comprehension and understanding--reading illustrations is essential to make meaning of picturebooks (Galda & Short, 1993). Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) explored how verbal and visual text interplay and posit that the tensions between these two sets of signs create unlimited possibilities for word-image interaction. Salisbury and Styles (2012) explored the various aspects of visual images in picturebooks as a unique art form of visual literature. In this vein, the ability of reading images is essential. Visual literacy refers to the ability to construct meaning from visual images (Giorgis, et al., 1999). According to Bamford (2003), to be visually literate, a person should be able to interpret images to gain meaning and to analyze the syntax of images. Bang (2000) explored how the visual elements affect emotional response and developed principles of emotionally charged arrangements of shapes on a page to build powerful visual statements.

Illustrations and visual literacy have been studied as a way of going beyond print-focused literacy practices in reading picturebooks; however, incorporating visual literacy in developing culturally conscious understanding and critical pedagogy is often overlooked in classrooms. Critical visual literacy is the ability to investigate the sociocultural contexts of visual texts to illuminate power relations. Chung (2013) posits that critical visual literacy aims at encouraging students to critically negotiate meanings with visual (mis)representations by placing the text in a sociopolitical context. Our inquiry explored the way in which students engage in reading illustrations and examined how students interpret illustrations as a cultural text. The broader aim of this project was to build a critical visual literacy curriculum.

This inquiry specifically explored: (1) how explicit teaching and learning of the visual elements facilitates students' engagement in responding to picturebooks; (2) how students negotiate their meaning making through the illustrations of picturebooks; and (3) how students investigate the embedded discourses in the illustrations of picturebooks through reading visual elements.

### Research Context and Procedure

Hee Young Kim and Angelica Serrano are doctoral students who collaborated on this project. Angelica was teaching a combined classroom of third and fourth grade students at a local elementary school during the time of the study. The elementary school is located in the southwest of the U.S. Eighty nine percent of the students were

Latino, four percent were Indigenous, four percent were White, and two percent were African American. Seventy nine percent of the students participated in a free or reduced lunch program. Hee Young visited Angelica’s classroom once a week for sixteen weeks.

This action research study combined critical visual literacy and reader response to create a semiotic approach to visual literacy instruction. The semiotic approach confronts the question of how images make meanings as signifying practice (Rose, 2016). Signifying practices refer to the meaning making behaviors in which people engage in following specific conventions or rules of construction and interpretation (Chandler, 2002). Just as with verbal signs, to be able to make meaning, knowledge of the basic grammar of syntax and semantics in visual signs is needed. According to Bamford (2003), the syntax of image refers to the pictorial structure and organization of visual elements (e.g. shapes, lines, colors). Visual semantics refers to the way images have meanings in the cultural process of communication.

After the instruction on visual elements, we read aloud a multicultural picturebook and students responded to the book. We examined how students used their learning of visual elements in their meaning making of this multicultural picturebook. We designed these experiences with the intention of deconstructing the notion of visual images as a creative art work and of providing an opportunity to see visual images as a meaning-making sign.

### Instruction of Visual Elements

Art instruction in classrooms traditionally has focused on creative artistic ability, rather than approaching visual elements as signifiers. We designed visual art instruction based on three basic elements of visual image: color, shape, and comparison, and taught each element in one of the three sessions. We read picturebooks about the elements (Table 1) and discussed how each element represents emotions and ideas.

Table 1. Children’s Literature used to explore Visual Elements

Visual Elements	Picturebooks
Color	Charles, N. N. (1994). <i>What am I?</i> Illus. by Dillon, L. New York: Scholastic. Hubbard, P. (1995). <i>My crayon talk</i> . Illus. by Karas, G. B. New York: Square Fish. Catalanotto, P. (2005). <i>Kitten red yellow blue</i> . New York: Atheneum Books. Young, J. (2013). <i>My blue is happy</i> . Illus. by Chien, C. Boston: Candlewick.
Shape	Fleming, D. (2014). <i>Go, shapes, go!</i> . San Diego, CA: Beach Lane Books.

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Falwell, C. (1992). *Shape space*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.  
MacDonald, S. (1998). *Sea shapes*. Boston: HMH Books for Young Readers.  
Dodds, D. A. (1996). *The shape of things*. Illus. by Lacome, J. St. Louis, MO: Turtleback.

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After reading these books, students explored their new learning. In one lesson, students chose one color to associate with meaning and drew pictures, Peggy (all names are pseudonyms) chose pink and drew images of hearts and peace. Ben chose blue and drew a scene of rain over the sea (Figure 1).



Figure 1a: Color



Figure 1b: Color

In the second lesson, we provided students with construction paper and scissors. Students cut various simple shapes of triangles, squares, and circles, and made a picture with those cut shapes (Figure 2).



Figure 2a: Shape



Figure 2b: Shape

In the third lesson, students learned about comparison. Drawing on Bang's (2000) book, *Picture This*, we showed students the comparison of big and small triangles and asked whom these two different size triangles can be associated. Students drew a T-chart and wrote descriptions of whom the two triangles might represent. Some students associated this comparison with a bully and a person being bullied. Others associated it with older and younger brother relationships. They associated the different sizes with power disparity (Figure 3).

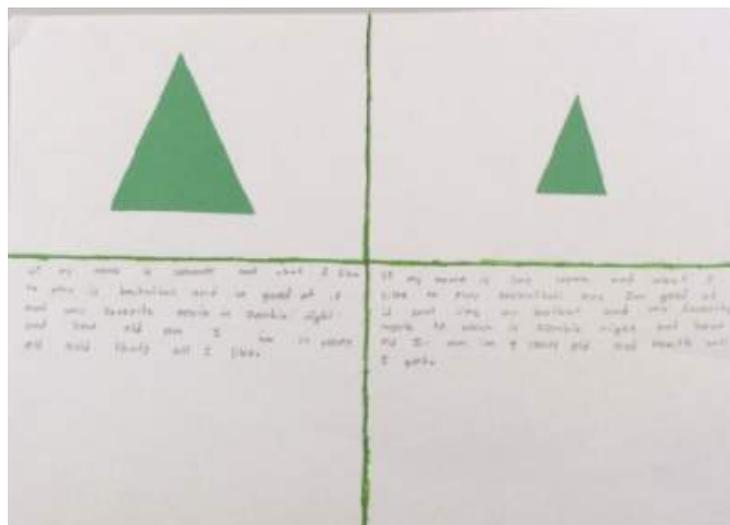


Figure 3a

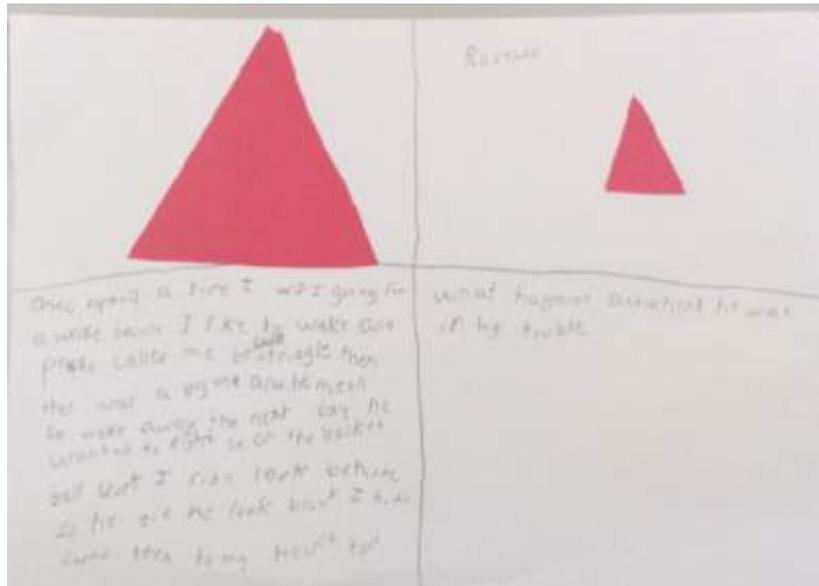


Figure 3b

Next, we showed them another example of comparison using sharp pointed lines and rounded lines. We asked students how these lines felt different. They said that the pointy line was scary and the rounded line was calm and smooth. After our discussion, they drew a T-chart and made an image using sharp and rounded lines along with writing a description (Figure 4).

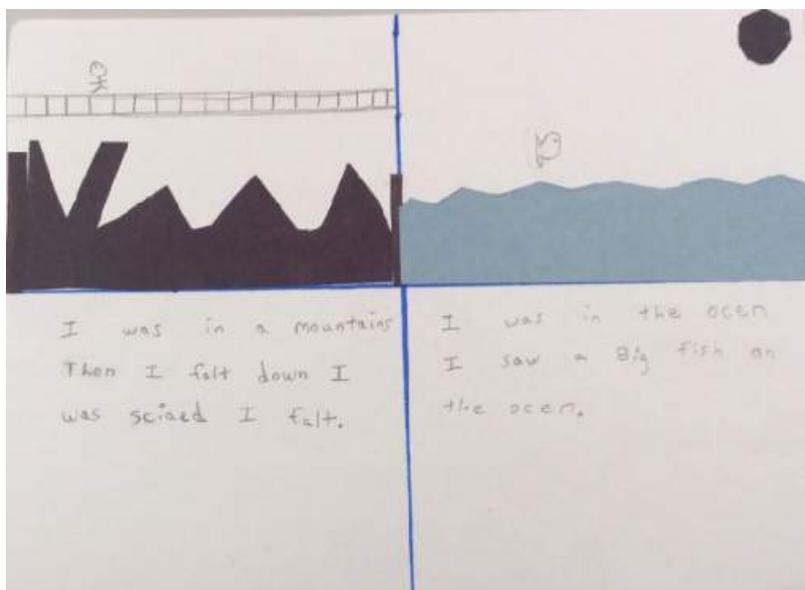


Figure 4a: Comparison of Line

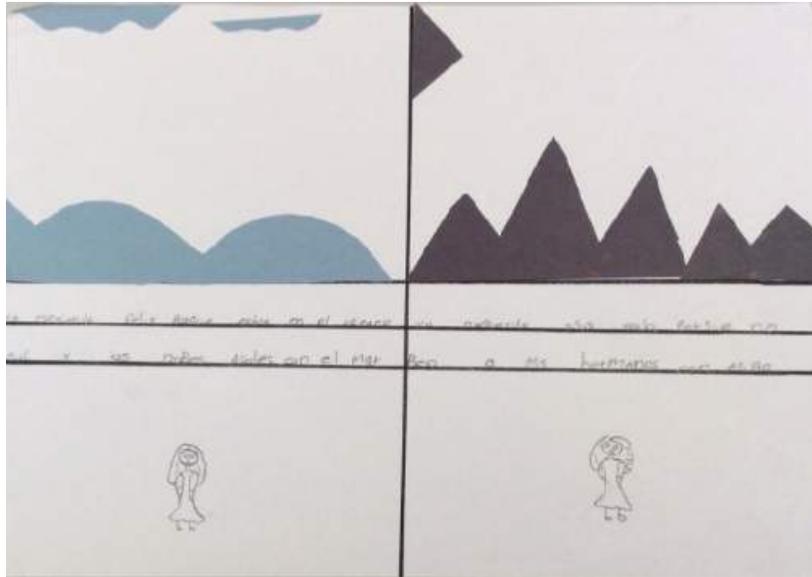


Figure 4b: Comparison of Line

During this lesson, we primarily used construction paper rather than drawing or painting. We hoped that through these activities students would gain an analytical stance toward visual images.

### Response to a Multicultural Picturebook

After learning about visual elements, we read aloud *Smoky Night* written by Eve Bunting and illustrated by David Diaz (1994). Daniel, an African American boy, lives with his mother in Los Angeles during the racially charged 1992 riots. In his community, Mrs. Kim, a Korean American, runs a grocery store. Daniel's family and Mrs. Kim do not get along with each other, however, they come to think that they should know each other when they observe their pet cats putting their differences aside.

We selected *Smoky Night* for this study for its socio-historical portrayal of the Los Angeles Riots in 1992, given that this study uses a critical approach to explore the historical, cultural, and ideological lines of authority that underlie social conditions (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2011). Secondly, this book was awarded the Caldecott Medal in 1995, which can be regarded as verification of the quality of the illustrations.

### Sociohistorical Context of *Smoky Night*

*Smoky Night* is set during the L.A. Riots, when a jury acquitted four L.A. police officers in the beating of Rodney King during his arrest for a traffic violation in 1991. A video of King, an African American, being beaten by four white L.A. policemen circulated throughout the media. The video, along with the LAPD's history of brutality and racial injustice fueled six days of rioting that left 63 people dead, 2383

people injured and an estimated \$1 billion dollars in property damages in areas including Koreatown, where 90% of the facilities were ruined (Lee, 2015).

A few weeks after the King incident, while the video of King's beating was widely being broadcasted and African Americans were protesting police brutality, Latasha Harlins, an African American girl, was shot by a Korean American grocery store owner, Soon Ja Du, during an altercation in the store. Du claimed self-defense and gave security video to the LAPD, hoping that the security video would vindicate her claim. The LAPD announced they were pursuing Du's actions as "Murder One", and released the videotape to the media. The media edited the video to show only the scene of Du shooting an unarmed African American girl, leading some to believe that the LAPD wanted to replace the brutal imagery of the Rodney King beating with the image of a Korean American merchant killing an African American girl (Romero, 2012).

This shooting by a Korean American merchant was not forgotten during the riots a few weeks later and many businesses in Koreatown were the target of looting and vandalism. Witnesses to the riots claim that the LAPD did not defend Korean-American business owners and allowed their businesses to burn (Lah, 2017).

This history informed our decision to explore a critical reading of the book through the visual images with students. We read aloud *Smoky Night* to students and showed each illustration so they could appreciate Diaz's artwork along with verbal text. On page four, we read aloud only the verbal text and did not show students the illustration. Instead, we asked students to draw their own illustration for the verbal text.

Through our content analysis of the book, we thought that this illustration was problematic. The verbal text describes the scene of rioting at Mrs. Kim's market, along with descriptions of the difficult relationship between Daniel's family and Mrs. Kim. In the illustration, Mrs. Kim is drawn in the center in a large size, holding her hands up. Rioters are visible with only part of their bodies, hands and nose and mouth, at the edge of the illustration. Mrs. Kim, in contrast, is depicted as a scary angry person. Her arms are depicted disproportionately large. Contextually, the rioters are African American and Mrs. Kim is Korean American. However, interestingly, only Mrs. Kim is depicted with thick black hair, while the African Americans characters in the previous pages such as the rioters, Daniel, and his mother, have brown hair. Mrs. Kim has red eyes, which are never Korean racial traits. According to Omi and Winant (2016), who acknowledge the instability and socially constructed characteristics of race, there is a crucial corporeal dimension to the race-concept. Race is ocular in an irreducible way and is a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies. In *Smoky Night*, this way of depicting phenotypes seems arbitrary. Mrs. Kim is portrayed with physical characteristics which are exploited to make her appear scarier than the rioters and protestors.

After students drew their own pictures, each student showed his/her picture to the whole class. For this whole group sharing we used a response engagement “Save the Last Word for Me” (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996), which aims to facilitate readers’ active reading by encouraging multiple interpretations of a particular visual image. An active stance in reading is facilitated by asking questions and looking for points of agreement or disagreement with other interpretations (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). Each student showed his/her drawing without commenting while other students stated what they thought that student’s picture signified. After listening to other students’ interpretations, the student who drew the picture said what each visual element in his/her drawing meant.

After students had shared their drawings, we showed them the illustration from page four of the book. Students were surprised by the illustration. Students discussed and wrote about how their understanding changed before and after they saw the illustration. After we finished reading the remainder of the book, we discussed the whole story. In addition, some of the students participated in interviews. We examined students’ pictures and comments to explore the ways in which they were using visual elements to consider meaning.

### **Use Visual Elements as Signs for Meaning Making**

More than half of the students drew illustrations in a realistic style. They drew visual images that were similar to real objects (Figure 5). Seven out of eighteen students represented their interpretation of the verbal text in semiotic ways using simple shapes and color. Students who used simple shapes in their drawings provided clear explanations about what their visual signs signified. Ben drew two big black triangles, which are as big as a three-story building (Figure 6). Ben said the triangles were stealers. He said that they were bad and scary people so he used black and drew them as big pointed triangles. Andy drew two houses with red and blue shapes of a triangle and a square (Figure 7). Andy stated that he used primary colors to show that Mrs. Kim and Daniel’s family do not get along with each other. While Andy was drawing, I asked him whether he liked drawing. He said that he was not good at drawing, so he did not enjoy drawing, but he could draw at least triangles and squares so now it was fun.

Through our explicit instruction about visual elements, students took a new perspective on visual images as a meaning signifying process and so more actively engaged in learning and meaning making. Isabella drew two cats (Figure 7). She depicted two cats with profiles, confronting each other. While most students drew pictures to show what happened, she focused on the theme of difference and conflict relationships. She represented the theme by drawing the cat’s faces with different colors and placing them in a confrontational position.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

### Negotiation of Meaning Making through Illustration

Nikolajeva and Scott (2000) delineated the various interplays between verbal and visual texts in picturebooks, arguing that counterpoint interaction of verbal text and illustrations can provide alternative information and contradiction between text and image. Through this characteristic, readers can be introduced to different interpretations of the event narrated by verbal text. This was the case when we showed students the illustration on page four of *Smoky Night* after they drew their own pictures. Students discussed and wrote the reason for their astonishment, comparing their meaning making before and after they saw the illustration.

### Social Context vs. Personalization

After listening to the verbal text, but before he saw the illustration, Luke said that he thought about the event of stealing. He was making meaning about the place where the rioting happened and drew the background of place. However, when we showed the illustration, he was astonished by what he saw and started to think about Mrs. Kim. This switch of attention to Mrs. Kim was not only the case for Luke, but for most students. After we collected students' drawings, we categorized them according to the theme they represented. Eight students drew about the background of place by drawing rows of stores, roads, cars, and small sized people. Five students focused more on the act of stealing. For example, one showed two big people carrying big bags, presumably filled with items from looting. Four students focused on conflict by drawing the confrontation between the two cats. Students' visual interpretations of

the verbal text were about where the event happened, what the event was, and how the relationship between characters developed. Conversely, the illustration in the book focuses on Mrs. Kim by positioning her whole body in a large size at the center of the page. None of students focused on Mrs. Kim. No one interpreted the verbal text as indicating the importance of Mrs. Kim. After students saw the illustration, they came to think about who Mrs. Kim was and how she looked.

### **Being Scared vs. Being a Scary Person**

When we showed the illustration, most said that they were astonished. When we asked why they were astonished, students said that it was because Mrs. Kim looked very scary, commenting that they had not considered Mrs. Kim to be a scary person. Sarah wrote about her changed interpretation of Mrs. Kim before and after she saw the illustration.

Before: I thought Mrs. Kim was going to be sad and do nothing but yell.

After: She is big tall scary looking and angry. Her arms are up. She yelling and she look a lot different.

Sarah explicitly stated that the reason why she changed her interpretation of Mrs. Kim was because of Mrs. Kim's visual posture in the illustration. Jasmine also wrote that "because Mrs. Kim was [should be] inside. She is sad, not angry just sad." Jasmine said the reason that Mrs. Kim is inside was because she was scared of rioters, so she must have stayed inside the building. After Jasmin saw the illustration, she changed interpretation to "she looks mad, angry."

### **Critical Examination of Racialization**

After the close reading session of the text and the visual image on page four, we read aloud the rest of book. Students used their developing ability of looking at visual elements as they responded to the rest of the book. This analytic ability encouraged students to look at the illustrations from a critical stance. They started to make inferences about the embedded racialization in the depiction of Mrs. Kim in the illustrations.

Students pointed at the color used in the depiction of Mrs. Kim and associated it with racial injustice. Many students pointed out that Mrs. Kim's skin and hair color was dark. Sandy said that Mrs. Kim's "black puffy hair looks scary", and "It will be calm. If Mrs. Kim was white, she won't be that scary." Students also pointed out that on page four when Mrs. Kim got angry and mad, her skin color was black, but at the end of the book when all the conflicts are resolved, her skin color turns to be whiter than any other characters' skin. Students clarified that the black color of the skin was associated with anger and madness, while the white skin color was associated with peace and happiness. We could see that students noticed that the factors that made Mrs. Kim appear scary were mainly connected to how the physical characteristics of Mrs. Kim were illustrated. Through being visually literate, students could clearly state the racialized discourse in which corporal traits associated with emotions of anger

and scariness, which are naturalized and embedded, but were scarcely being discussed.

Reading visual elements was a useful tool for students to explore the embedded discourses of the book. Students made their own inferences and provided evidence for their inference by stating their visual analysis. Robin said during the interview;

“[I am] kind of sad, but it’s being mean to Mrs. Kim, because they are putting, look, because in this picture, I can really see. Look. Kim, because they are putting all of these people with one color and she’s in the back (pointing to another page). She has different color. That’s being mean to Mrs. Kim. Just because she is different color doesn’t mean that you have to treat her that way. They didn’t like Mrs. Kim because she has another color. In this story, they treat her bad.”

By exploring the illustration based on their knowledge of visual elements with strong agency and critical discourses, students adopted critical and active stances in responding to the book. Although who “they” are was not clearly stated during his interview, we could see that Robin was taking an active critical stance to the way Mrs. Kim was depicted by the illustrator and/or treated by other characters.

## Conclusion

Picturebooks bring together two different sign systems--verbal text and visual images. Consequently, the ability to read illustrations is crucial to understanding any picturebook. In this study, instruction in meaning-making through visual elements facilitated students’ engagement in responding to picturebooks and students came to understand reading visual images as a meaning making practice. They represented their responses to the verbal text with visual images and clearly stated the meaning of each visual element. Visual literacy was a useful approach to help students take a critical stance in understanding picturebooks. Visual literacy enabled students to provide explicit reasoning for their understandings and interpretations so that they were able to have agency in their meaning making strategies.

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## Engaging Preservice Teacher Candidates with Multicultural Children's Literature

Mary L. Fahrenbruck and Leanna Lucero

“From my view, best practice means that [multicultural] books are integrated, and students have access to multicultural literature for silent reading, homework assignments, and across subjects...Having a wide range of books offers students opportunities to inquire about the world and its people, world events, and areas of interest to them” (Cueto & Hillman, 2017).

Cueto and Hillman's words ring true for inservice teachers who know the power of culturally and linguistically relevant multicultural children's literature (MCL) to transform the lives of readers. Margaret Meek states that when inservice teachers strategically embed literature throughout the curriculum they,

“...help children learn that words mean more than they say, how they help children to tolerate uncertainty, how they recruit children into confronting the “world as it might be” and how they help children to encounter the “intertext of... (their own) unconscious” and so grow in self-awareness and reading reflexivity” (Meek in Smith, 2011, p. 1).

Because of our own experiences as avid readers and teachers, we know the transformative power of multicultural children's literature. As teacher educators at a public university, we want to pass along to preservice teacher candidates our passion for children's literature as a source of enjoyment and a transformative teaching resource. As such, we consider ourselves successful when it comes to creating opportunities for candidates to read for enjoyment. However, we discovered we have been less successful when it comes to helping candidates understand that MCL can transform the lives of the students they will soon teach.

In this article, we share the strategic plan we developed to immerse candidates in MCL during our Reading, Math and Language Arts methods courses. We describe response strategies that helped candidates transact more deeply with the literature. Then we share ways we invited candidates to use MCL in the lessons they taught to children in practicum classrooms. We conclude with our new understandings about connecting candidates with MCL.

### Situating Our Work

The preservice teacher candidates with whom we work, typically juniors and seniors, enroll in methods courses taught off campus at a local public school. Concurrently, they complete a 160-hour practicum experience where they work with teachers and children in elementary classrooms. The practicum classroom provides a supportive, authentic space for candidates to put into practice what they are learning in their methods courses.

The candidates enrolled in our methods courses mirror the demographics of preservice teacher candidates from many other university teacher education programs (TEP) in that they are mostly females between 21-27 years old. Because of the university's location in the Borderland region of the US and its designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution, most candidates (approximately 75%) self-identify as Lantinx (Ramirez & Blay, 2016). Candidates also identify as white, Native American and African-American. Prior to entering the TEP, candidates complete a children's literature course (taught in the English Department) and a multicultural education course. The courses focus on multiculturalism and social justice issues; tenets that frame the mission and vision of the university. Because of these courses, we believed candidates would be familiar with MCL titles, authors and illustrators and would easily integrate MCL into the lessons they create during their methods courses.

### Uncovering Candidates' Disconnect with MCL

Despite candidates' preparation prior to enrolling in the TEP, we found that they were unfamiliar with authors, illustrators and even titles of popular multicultural children's literature. When we first made this discovery, we attempted to fill the void by asking candidates to read 20 multicultural children's books that resonated with them. Through the assignment, we encouraged candidates to read stories for their own enjoyment. Short (2012) warned us that teachers often value literature not for the stories themselves, but for their usefulness to "teach something else- reading skills, critical thinking, writing models, historical events, mathematical concepts" (p. 9). We wanted to expand candidates' disposition toward the purposes of MCL to include reading for pleasure and reading to transform the ways people think about being and acting in the world today. We wanted candidates to experience the power of stories to "create our views of the world and [as] the lens through which we construct meaning about ourselves and others" (Short, 2012, p. 9).

As the first semester ended, we reflected on the success of the assignment. We were disappointed when we noted the literature candidates had selected for the assignment were what Mary refers to as *chicken nuggets*; stories without much cultural substance that children will enjoy, but not grow from having read. These included Disney-themed books and *I Can Read* books. We lamented that if candidates were unable to select quality MCL for themselves, how would they be able to select MCL to transform the lives of their future students. We knew we needed to create a new plan. We decided to be more strategic about the ways we immersed candidates in MCL, facilitating their transactions with the stories and encouraging them to teach with the literature. We analyzed artifacts from candidates (e.g. course assignments, teaching reflections, course evaluations), looking for evidence that they were developing a passion for children's literature and an understanding of the transformative power of MCL as a teaching resource.

### Immersing Candidates in Multicultural Children's Literature

The first step in our plan required us to introduce candidates to culturally and linguistically rich multicultural children's literature during our courses. We

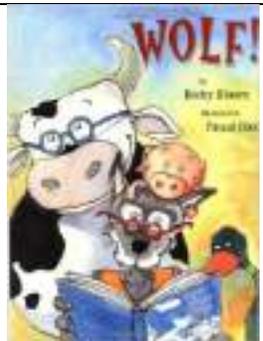
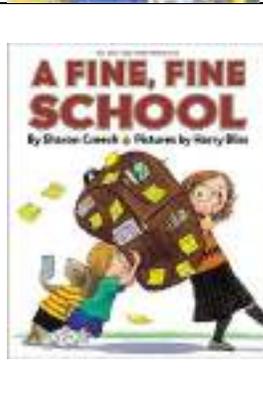
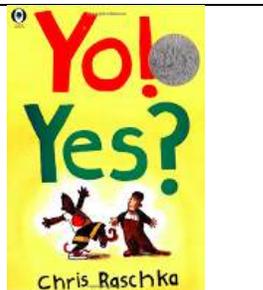
employed three strategies: 1) modeling read alouds, 2) using professional resources, in this case rubrics, to determine quality MCL, and 3) selecting MCL as a required reading for the courses we teach. We collected artifacts from candidates to document their responses.

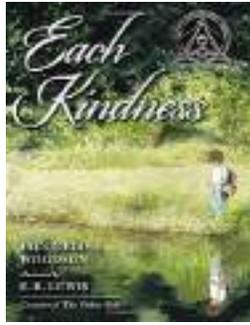
### Modeling Read Alouds

Our purposes for read alouds was to introduce candidates to quality MCL, to model reading aloud to a group, and to engage them in critical conversations about literature. Because Mary teaches the literacy methods course, she began reading aloud on the first day. Mary’s read aloud text selections at the beginning of the semester are strategic and relate to the essential understanding of the course for that day. Below, we highlight examples of the literature, the essential understanding and our reflections about the literature in Mary’s methods course.

Table 1

*Read Aloud Stories used to Introduce Candidates to Children’s Literature*

Literature	Essential Understandings and Reflection
	<p>Candidates discuss the transformation of Wolf from a wild savage animal to a sophisticated intellect as a result of his learning to read. We connect this message to stereotypes associated with readers and reading. Candidates are introduced to “the literacy club” (Smith, 1994, p. 229) and challenged to think about their place in the club. We explore the tensions and connections candidates have with the text. For example, Wolf purchases his very own book with money he has saved. Candidates often connect with Wolf as they tell about the joy they felt when they purchased their very own books as children.</p>
	<p>In this story, Tillie must attend school every day of the year because the principal at her school wants all the children to learn as much as they can. Candidates discuss the notion of life-long learning in and outside of school. They come to understand the importance of accessing students’ funds of knowledge (González, Moll &amp; Amanti, 2005). Candidates begin to read verbal and visual narratives with a critical lens, uncovering bias’s they’ve not thought about. For example, candidates empathized with Tillie because she must attend school on Christmas, but most never considered that their Jewish classmates must attend school on Hanukkah and their Muslim classmates must attend on Ramadan. With this text, candidates begin to make more critical text--to--text and text--to--world connections.</p>
	<p>This story of friendship, told in 28 words, helps candidates understand the reciprocal relationship between verbal and visual narratives. They begin to value illustrations as much as they value the text. The sparse text also reinforces our suggestion to pre-read and then practice reading aloud the text before reading to an audience.</p>



Bullying is frequent topic of conversation among candidates. As such, they connect with the story of Chloe and Maya until they realize the story does not have the “happily ever after” ending they expect. The conversations surrounding *Each Kindness* reveal that many candidates have limited experiences transacting with unpredictable plots in MCL. As such, candidates must grapple with the fact that many stories reflect the unpleasant realities children and adults encounter throughout their lives. Candidates experience a shift in their thinking about children’s literature after the read aloud of *Each Kindness*.

## Resources to Analyze MCL

In our conversations with candidates, we acknowledge that it’s difficult to determine quality MCL. We discuss accuracy and authenticity with candidates. Then we share with them the rubrics we use ourselves to determine the quality of a text.

- *10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books for Racism and Sexism* by Kathy Short (<http://wowlit.org/links/evaluating-global-literature/10-quick-ways-to-analyze-childrens-books-for-racism-and-sexism/>)
- *Criteria for Selecting Nonfiction Picture Books* by Sharon Ruth Gill (<http://www.ldonline.org/article/40062/>)
- *Children’s Science Trade Books Evaluation Form* by Pamela A. Halsey and Susan G. Elliott found in their article, *Assessing Textbook Publishers’ Recommendations for Using Children’s Literature in Science* (see references for full citation).

Candidates used the resources to identify quality MCL, which they were required to incorporate into lessons they crafted later in the semester. In some instances, candidates shared these resources with the practicum teachers with whom they worked. Using and sharing these resources signaled to us that candidates were beginning to value MCL.

## Building Candidate’s Professional Libraries

Another strategy we used to immerse candidates in MCL was to require them to purchase MCL. We reasoned that owning MCL would help candidates build their classroom libraries. One way we helped candidates acquire MCL was to ask them to purchase specific books as part of the required texts for the courses we teach. We used these books in our teaching and encouraged them to use the texts and strategies with children in the practicum classroom. Along the way, we noticed that some candidates didn’t purchase the books, telling us they couldn’t afford the books and so borrowed them from the university or public library. As former teachers, we remembered the invaluable resources we’ve accessed through our public libraries and consequently supported and encouraged all candidates to access books through this resource. Another way we helped candidates acquire MCL was to invite them to purchase books through Scholastic book orders. Candidates fondly remembered the

book orders from their childhoods and many ordered books each month. By this time in the semester, candidates eagerly anticipated our read alouds, thoughtfully collected resources and were building their own classroom libraries. Table 2 provides guiding steps we used to help candidates learn to utilize tableaux (plural of Tableau) as a literature response strategy (Fahrenbruck, 2014).

Table 2

*Steps for Teaching the Tableau Strategy* (Adapted from Misiewicz, 2009)

First	Explain that a Tableau is a frozen or still scene that shows, rather than tells, their understanding of a story or a portion of the story (e.g. scene, climax).
Next	Practice creating a Tableau. Emphasize facial expressions, body position and placement, and the use of props to convey meaning. Readers can work individually, with a partner or in groups. Include objects (e.g. a flower, spaghetti), emotions (e.g. joy, bewilderment), and abstract concepts (e.g. democracy).
Then	Groups select a portion of a story to depict as a Tableau. Provide time to rehearse their Tableaux.
Finally	Present Tableaux to an audience. Audience members verbally share their understandings about the Tableaux. After the audience has shared their understandings of the Tableau, readers share with the audience the various components of the Tableau and the reasoning behind the components.

### Facilitating Candidates Transactions with Multicultural Children’s Literature

When we asked candidates to think of ways they might convey their understanding of the stories we read, they typically responded with activities such as keeping a reading log, writing a letter to one of the characters in the story or writing a traditional book report. Their responses paved the way for us to expand their repertoire of response strategies from paper/pencil to art and drama. The second step in our plan required us to facilitate candidates’ transactions with the text. Three activities we used during our courses to accomplish this include: 1) story ray, 2) dramatic tableau, and 3) literature discussions.

#### Story Ray

Candidates understand that response strategies provide a way for teachers to assess readers’ comprehension of a text. Moving beyond typical response strategies (i.e. worksheet, book report) is often a new, highly engaging experience for them. We’ve found the story ray (Short & Harste, 1996) strategy popular among candidates. For this strategy, readers collaboratively create a chapter by chapter unfolding of a novel on narrow strips of white paper (approximately 2” wide X 36” long). We use adding machine paper (for those of you who remember adding machines). In the photo below, each candidate created one visual ray, representing a chapter from *I am a Taxi* by Deborah Ellis (2011). The rays are connected and displayed in the shape of the sun.



Figure 1

Each story ray provides a strong sense of the chapter, with a focus on ideas, themes, characters, setting, mood and tone. To begin their story rays, candidates skimmed their selected chapters several times, paying attention to images, symbols, colors, and words or phrases that seem especially significant. Then they considered some guiding questions to help them plan their story rays:

- How can I offer a visual essence of this chapter?
- What color(s) do I use for the background and for the images I choose to represent?
- Why are these colors significant to the chapter?
- What images, symbols, artifacts, items, should I represent on this strip of paper?
- What is the significance of each? Should I repeat any images? What layout should I use to capture a strong sense of my chapter?
- Should I include words? A quote? A short phrase? If so, where do the words belong on my story ray? Should I repeat them? If so, why?
- Leave little or no white space on your ray, unless white is essential to what you are creating. Consider using a variety of media to create bold colors--collage', torn paper, paint, pastels, mixed media, etc. (Short & Harste, 1996)



Figure 2

The photo above illustrates readers' interpretations of the novel while considering the guiding questions. The green and brown colors represent the setting of the jungle. The red letters in the word "Explode" seem to shatter into pieces, representing a major event in the plot (which we won't reveal).

Candidates presented their story rays in class where we used them to facilitate a discussion about the novel. During the discussion, they shared their new thinking about the chapter and/or the book that resulted from planning for and creating their story ray. Then we displayed the story ray in the hallway at the school where we worked. In doing so we offered children and teachers a visual sense of the plot, characters, and issues in the novel, hopefully inviting them to read the book themselves.

### Dramatic Tableau

In this strategy, candidates used their bodies and facial expressions to create a still or frozen scene that conveys their new understandings about the ideas, theme, characters, plot, and setting of a story (Farmer, 2013). Table 2 provides guiding steps we used to help candidates learn to utilize tableaux (plural of Tableau) as a literature response strategy.

We also invited candidates to watch videos of inservice teachers implementing the dramatic tableau strategy with children in classrooms (see for example, *Dramatic Tableaux* from Annenberg Learner; <https://www.learner.org/resources/series169.html>). Watching children use the strategy in the classroom provided a context for candidates to see how the guiding steps can be taught and how this strategy helps readers make deeper connections to a novel.

Candidates worked in small groups to create dramatic tableaux of award-winning novels and then performed their tableaux for the children at the school where we worked. Afterwards, several candidates implemented tableaux in their practicum classrooms with children. Candidates like Marie found the strategy beneficial, stating,

“At first I did not understand how this could be used as an effective response strategy in the classroom. After participating in the activity and viewing the video, this is an assignment I hope to be able to use in my student teaching and in my future classroom. This was a beneficial assignment because it taught me a more creative way to have students respond to a reading instead of them answering comprehension questions.” (Marie, personal communication, 2014).

### Literature Discussions

Leanna used *Dante and Aristotle Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz (2014) as a required piece of relevant multicultural young adult literature for the Language Arts methods course. This book has won numerous awards including the Pura Belpré Narrative Medal for Latino fiction and the Stonewall Book Award for LGBTQ fiction. Leanna used this coming-of-age novel to engage candidates in conversations about racial identity, gender identity, and sexuality. These conversations revealed that most candidates have very limited experiences reading LGBTQ children’s/young adult literature and even more limited experiences discussing issues surrounding identity. James commented,

“I never would have thought about including LGBTQ literature until reading this book and discussing it. It made me think of my own views and biases and how I will approach such issues in my future classroom.”

After reading *Dante and Aristotle Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, candidates expressed a new understanding about the value of including LGBTQ children’s literature in elementary classrooms. Selena connected the story to the issue of bullying and thought “[it] could be prevented if topics such as sexuality, race, and disabilities were brought up and integrated into a lesson through the use of LGBT children’s literature.” Candidates voiced a high level of commitment to incorporating this genre in their future classrooms, as well as understood the need to have critical conversations about this literature.

### Supporting the Use of Multicultural Children’s Literature in Teaching

By this time in the semester, candidates were eager to share MCL with children in their practicum classrooms. As such, we designed course assignments that required candidates to use MCL in their lessons for children. These assignments represented the third step in our plan: to support candidates as they used MCL in transformative ways to enhance their teaching and enrich children’s learning.

### Read Aloud Lesson

Mindful of the fact that many candidates have never read aloud to a large group of children, our first assignment invited them to conduct a whole class read aloud with MCL. By this time, candidates had seen us model read aloud moves (i.e. reading with expression, showing the illustrations) and were ready to read aloud to children for pleasure and enjoyment. We asked candidates to provide a rationale for their selection of the read aloud book because we wanted them to experience using the rubrics to determine quality MCL. With a few exceptions, most candidates found MCL on their own.

Candidates expressed surprise and delight when they reflected on this read aloud experience. Candidates noted that children enjoyed the MCL and wanted to share their connections with their classmates. Candidates were surprised when children referenced the MCL in their writing and when they continued to make connections days after the read aloud ended. This lesson helped us convince candidates of the importance of reading aloud culturally and linguistically relevant MCL.

### **Integrated Reading/Math Lesson**

For this assignment, we created an integrated project that combined elements from Mary's literacy course with elements from Leanna's math course. For this project, we invited candidates to select MCL to read aloud to children and then teach a math concept embedded in the text. Our purposes for this project were for candidates to explore ways math can help children better understand a story and for candidates to directly experience children's connections to MCL.

Candidates understood that selecting quality MCL would set the stage for a successful lesson. They visited libraries and book stores to find MCL. Titles included *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* (Tonatiuh, 2013), *Henry's Freedom Box* (Levin, 2007), and *The Water Princess* (Verde & Badiel, 2016).

With support, candidates identified a portion of the plot that math could be used to help children better comprehend the story. For example, in *Henry's Freedom Box*, children used math to calculate the area of the box Henry used to mail himself north to freedom. Knowing the dimensions helped children understand how minuscule the box was for an adult. The children empathized with Henry as he endured excruciating pain from traveling in the box. Empathizing with Henry also helped children understand how desperately Henry wanted to escape the bonds of slavery. Using math to better comprehend the story brought children closer to Henry and his quest for freedom, something neither the text nor illustrations could fully accomplish.

In both the Read Aloud Lesson and the Integrated Reading/Math Lesson, candidates wrote lesson reflections where they noted that children eagerly participated in the lessons. After teaching the Integrated Lesson using *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* (Tonatiuh, 2013), Amaya wrote, "By choosing engaging literature on topics that children have never heard of or talked about before, we truly grabbed their attention and intrigued the students from the get go." In Elise's Read Aloud Lesson reflection

she wrote that she “was definitely surprised that the students... told [me] how much they loved this activity and how they wanted to have the opportunity to do this again.” Candidates like Josiah also noted that children “asked deeper questions” about MCL than when they read stories from their curriculum textbooks. Josiah wrote that “these questions assured me that [children] were working and thinking beyond the story.” Candidates like Christy concluded that incorporating MCL in lessons “is a lot of work, but it is well worth it” because it was an effective way to engage children in reading and responding to MCL.

Using MCL also presented tensions for some candidates like Tara who wondered “What will parents think about the topics” in MCL. She defended her decision to use MCL though, writing “It’s not like [the topics] aren’t talked about at home.” Kevin went so far as to say MCL “that show[s] division amongst different cultures should be avoided” because “it can have a negative effect on certain students...rather than showing issues it might be a better strategy to...teach unity and equality to students.” Tara and Kevin’s comments helped us understand the struggles candidates still had despite our efforts to engage them with MCL.

### **Impact of Candidates’ Transactions with Multicultural Children’s Literature**

At the end of the semester, we concluded that our plan to engage preservice teacher candidates with MCL had a significant impact on the way they transacted with and began to value MCL. Javier came to strongly believe that MLC “supports diversity, allows learners to be critical learners and attempts to value all lives, especially highlighting issues revolving around power and oppression.”

Encouraging candidates to teach lessons that included MCL provided them with multiple opportunities to experience the high level of student engagement that accompanies teaching with MCL. Jed noted “As we read, [the children] were all focused on the book and were eager to see the illustrations. It seemed they were most intrigued because of the quality of the text we chose.” Tara said she “really enjoyed getting to see children get excited about the topic...they were more receptive than I even expected!”

Engaging candidates with MCL also provided ideas for lesson plans for their future classrooms. Gracie said she would like to integrate MCL “into a writing/reading workshop” because MCL will provide fodder for children “to write about that they can relate to on a more personal level.” Hugo thought MCL would “go well with social studies” especially “when the literature ties in with the content matter...and standards.”

At the beginning of this article, we confessed our limited success helping preservice teacher candidates understand the transformative power of MCL. The evidence from this study indicated that we enhanced candidates’ understanding through meaningful engagements with MCL. They developed a deeper appreciation of MCL and came to understand that MCL can transform the lives of their future students.

Mallory validated our efforts best when she wrote “I feel as though this semester prepared me to feel comfortable and confident with using MCL.”

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## Reading Challenging Texts

S. Rebecca Leigh

My pre-service teachers enter a quiet, darkened classroom.

I cannot see their faces and they cannot see mine – I have purposely turned off the fluorescent lights. I need to create a mood that helps establish the tone of the story that I am about to read. The classroom feels too modern to receive it, their detachment to history too great that I must bridge it, somehow.

I am about to read Ruth Vander Zee’s (2003) *Erika’s Story*.

This story is many things: penetrating, soulful, raw, and honest.

This story speaks to broader themes of sacrifice and unity. It also addresses death, a rather taboo topic for the K-8 classroom.

My students find their way to their seats. Tea lights on the tables greet them, flicker and reassure, throwing soft light on an unusual classroom session.

I am but a silhouette at the front of the room.

“Take a seat, any seat,” I say softly.

There are some audible giggles and whispers of “What’s going on?”

Gently, I tap the xylophone once: ding.

The room grows quiet.

More students trickle in.

Slowly, I turn my rain-stick: *swooooosh*.

Everyone has arrived, waiting and wondering.

Finally, I play a cord on my flute that creates a hollow, haunting sound: *loo-a-loo-a-loo*.

The instruments help to signify that the darkness in the classroom has meaning:

We are sitting in the dark on purpose.

We do not need to physically see each other for this read aloud; we can see one another through the power of story and language. We only need to sit and listen. Listen and be cracked open by someone else's story – or so I paraphrase.

I begin to read Vander Zee's (2003) opening lines, a series of uncertainties:

*I do not know my birthdate.*

*I do not know my birth name.*

*I do not know in what city or country I was born...*

Like poetry, every word counts. And the repetition punctuates many things for Erika. For the reader. For the listener.

I vary my pitch and pace. I pause. I make eye contact, even in the dark.

*Erika's Story* (Vander Zee, 2003) is a picture book but I do not show the pictures during the reading. Sometimes, the words challenge enough.

The classroom has shifted from quiet to still. The room once dark feels darker yet. Not a cell phone checked, not a wrapper crinkled for its cracker inside.

Sometimes, a story is more important than the words. And, sometimes, the words matter because they can breathe life into a story. My students' slow breathing tells me that they can feel these words. They feel Erika's longing and her parents' agony.

I continue reading. And suddenly, I am done. The story is short but the silence is long. Texts that challenge readers have this effect. They can serve up the most healing medicine if we are willing to listen and see fully.

Students speak up, ask questions in this language arts methods course. Others remain silent, wrapped in a story of loss and hope. They are deeply affected by Erika's life story, her trauma really. "What makes trauma traumatic is the incapacity to respond adequately, accompanied by feelings of profound helplessness and loss, and a sense that no other person or group will intervene. What makes trauma traumatic is the loss of self and other" (Britzman, 2000, p. 202). Even so, thoughtful instruction acknowledges that a traumatic story has a place in the classroom.

"You read sad stories, Professor Leigh," says one of my students.

It is true; I do.

"I love these sad stories," writes another on an exit slip, an important 5x7 piece of paper where students can reflect on, construct, and extend their knowing (Fisher & Frey, 2004; Preddy, 2008) as a process for thinking deeply about teaching as a

profession (Leigh, 2012). My students are divided, also true. Some love these texts but most wrestle with them.

What my students call *sad stories* I call *real reads*; real, because every story is someone's story. And because I had a student who used to say, "Keepin' it real eh, Professor Leigh" whenever I read a text that called for in-depth listening and discussion; a story that called on students to reach for words other than 'cute' and 'interesting.' And when we frame our questions around texts that promote a rich and meaningful interaction between content and students' ideas, we challenge our students to think (Thomas & Schmidt, 2011). By challenging, I am not referring to what makes text challenging such as vocabulary, sentence structure, organization, etc. In this vignette, I am referring to texts whose content challenges our comfort levels, especially as we read stories aloud in a classroom.

There are many reasons why the pre-service teachers I work with now wrestle with the idea of one day reading a challenging text in their classrooms—the content concerns a topic and/or a demographic that they know very little about; the content addresses a taboo topic (e.g., death); and the content makes them uncomfortable because they have no personal experience with it. Because of their limited experience, the content:

- raises questions, general and specific, that they feel they can only answer abstractly;
- spotlights their discomfort, which can make them visibly embarrassed (e.g. blushing);
- increases their worry that they might anger and be confronted by administration and/or parents.

Their concerns, I believe, are not unfounded. In 1967, American writer and former teacher in the Boston Public Schools, Johnathan Kozol, was fired for having read a Langston Hughes poem in class. While that was fifty years ago, in 2008 a teacher in Indiana was suspended for encouraging her students to read Filipovic's (1999) *The Freedom Writers' Diary*, a collection of powerful stories written by adolescent students who call themselves "Freedom Writers" in homage to The Freedom Riders of the civil rights movement in America (Goldenberg, 2008). In 2012, a middle school teacher in South Carolina was suspended for reading excerpts of Orson Scott Card's (1994) *Ender's Game*, a story about training children to become soldiers (Kain, 2012). And more recently, an elementary teacher in North Carolina resigned after parents protested his reading of de Haan's (2003) *King and King* to a third-grade class, a story about two princes who marry and defy traditional notions of marriage (Schaub, 2015).

Author Stephen King (2000) says that every book is a letter to someone. I believe each time an educator presses against mandated curriculum with a challenging text, that teacher creates with each push, sometimes gentle sometimes hard, spaces for children to hear stories that feel personally relevant. Books as letters, delivered as stories that resonate. "What happens," I ask my students, "when teachers refrain from reading books in class in which students can see themselves and/or their families,

recognize their struggles, feel their worries? What happens to those students' sense of agency in the classroom?" As a teacher of teachers, it matters what I read to my students. By reading texts that are rich in both story and relevance, I empower students to make, see, and feel connections between themselves and the world (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Among my personal list of real reads, Ruth Vander Zee's (2003) *Erika's Story* is the one text that seems to best close the gap between students and their world. Why? Because invariably somebody in the classroom has a connection to the Holocaust, often through a grandparent or distant relative. Somebody is adopted. Somebody is Jewish. Most everyone knows what it feels like to experience loss or to feel unsure of one's life path. It is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the story that strikes the most.

Mines the heart.

Leaves you bare.

Late on a weeknight, this title often pops up in the subject line of my inbox, in Instant Messenger, or a text from former students long graduated with a degree in elementary education and now teaching in a K-8 classroom. Actually, what pops up goes something like this: "Hey Professor Leigh, what's that book called again about the baby thrown from the train? I want to read it to my students."

The thrown baby.

From a moving train.

It is an image that makes you swallow hard. It is a story that you cannot un-hear once you have heard it.

When the read aloud is done, the classroom lights back on, I typically ask pre-service teachers, "How can you use this text to create spaces for dialogue that bring not just awareness of issues present in your classroom, like bullying for example, but also develop empathy and compassion for others?" This changes the conversation for the first-year teacher from which books are safe to read to what books should I be reading that help create a more democratic society.

Until we get comfortable with our discomfort reading challenging texts, children will continue to hear safe stories. Good stories, sure. But safe, easy-to-digest stories. The problem with limiting one's read aloud selection to safe stories is that, like stereotypes, they only offer one perspective. When we limit what we read to our children, they do not see read aloud as a socio-cultural practice through which we can develop compassion and empathy for others. If teachers are serious about developing children's awareness towards others, they need to incorporate children's literature in the curriculum that is both compelling and relevant.

Teachers at the college and university levels who use student-empowering social justice pedagogy in their teaching make it possible for pre-service teachers to

envision what reading challenging texts looks and feels like. When teachers create this kind of space, they can spark enthusiasm and in turn want to read texts that challenge but also unite, inspire, and comfort. True, infant-Erika is thrown from a train in a mother's desperate effort to save her from certain death, hopeful that someone might take her and raise her. But having a thoughtful discussion with students about illustrator Roberto Innocenti's use of line, its thickness and direction, and color to offset Erika wrapped in a pink blanket against a monochrome scene acknowledges that art elements affect our understanding of text (Bang, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

One way to provide opportunities that encourage pre-service teachers in their social justice pedagogy is to ground read aloud practices in what fifth grade teacher Mr. Truong calls the "4Es" (Duncan-Andrade, 2005, p.71):

- 1 Engage. Provide culturally responsive teaching that validates students' funds of knowledge.
- 2 Experience. Expose students to various possible realities by presenting narratives that show the perspectives of those often unheard in society.
- 3 Empower. Use a critical and transformative pedagogy to give students a sense of agency, both individual and collective, to act on the conditions in their lives.
- 4 Enact. Create opportunities for students to act out their growing sense of agency, learning from and reflecting on their successes and struggles.

The 4Es provide a useful lens for pre-service teachers who see value in texts that challenge and engage readers but are, nevertheless, unsure of how to design their pedagogy around them. But this lens can, and to my mind should be, fluid. Teachers do not have to address all four Es with every text that they read, an important consideration in a teaching climate that is heavily governed by mandated curriculum and standardized testing. When first introducing these concepts, I like to read Eve Bunting's (1999) *Smoky Night*, a story about urban violence that was inspired by the Los Angeles riots of the early 1990s. It is an ideal text because while most of my pre-service teachers, themselves Millennials, know very little about the Los Angeles riots, they know a fair bit about the 1967 Detroit riots.

Using this emancipatory pedagogy, which emphasizes change in one's perception, I ask questions to create spaces and directions for their thinking:

- Engage. "What do you know about the 1967 Detroit riots? What stories did you grow up with that concern this violent time in American history? How might they be similar or different than the Los Angeles riots? What does it mean to have cultural capital and what is your cultural capital?" Ask questions that engage students to talk about their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992) that they bring to a read aloud experience.
- Experience. "*Smoky Night* is just one model of someone's reality during a very difficult time; Daniel and his mother lose their home to an apartment fire. What other realities do you know of that are like Daniel's that we can give a

- voice to so that we might expand and deepen our perspective on terrifying experiences and loss?” Initiate a dialogue that invites reflection and sharing.
- Empower. “What social conditions do you see in your community and surrounding neighborhood that *Smoky Night* makes you think about? Can you identify some ways to dismantle some of these conditions?” Provide spaces, in small and whole group settings, for students to fully express and feel the vibrancy of their ideas. Empowerment is born from feeling heard.
  - Enact. “What kind of feelings does this story surface for you? How might you use your emotional responses to become an agent of change in your home and school community?” Use a Visual Thinking Strategy (Ritchart et al., 2011) such as color, symbol, image (CSI) to help students access their feelings. Emotion is inextricably tied to enactment.

Students do not send me last-minute-late-night messages about books for nothing. I believe they make contact because they want their children to experience that feeling you get, that they got, from listening to a story that delivers on affect and offers a model of reality unlike their own.

When these pre-service teachers eventually have a classroom of their own, I figure whatever they read--be it Jacqueline Woodson’s (2002) *Visiting Day* about a girl who visits her father in prison, or Monica Gunning’s (2013) *A Shelter in Our Car* about a widowed-mother and daughter who make ends meet from temporarily living in their car, or Margaret Wild’s (2007) *Woolvs in the Sitee* about an adolescent boy who finds himself homeless--it matters that they delve into stories and characters’ experiences that are unlike their own. It may not be their story; it may not be yours or mine. Even so, the desire to read the story acknowledges that it is someone’s. In the words of CS Lewis: “We read to discover that we are not alone” (Du Toit, 2010, p. 102).

### Author’s Note

I dedicate this vignette to J.A.B. and V.A.O. for sharing *Erika’s Story* with me.

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