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Initiating Courageous Conversations about Race and Racism with Read-Alouds

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Introduction

Bettye Latimer's opening line in an article published in *The Reading Teacher* in 1976 states, "All of us—you and I—have grown up in a society besieged with racism…Ironically enough, the longevity of this very war has been sustained by a sophisticated weapon known as 'education'" (p. 151). Forty-four years later, this claim is no less true. Protests against police brutality and anti-Black racism once again erupted last year, starting in May, spreading across the globe, and continuing for months. The pleas of these protesters are not new. Calls for teachers to educate themselves so that they might incorporate anti-racist pedagogy and courageous conversations in their classrooms are also not new. But the death of George Floyd and the ensuing protests compelled many teachers to examine their efforts anew.

We offer this article in response to those educators who are seeking resources on how to address these topics—race, racism, police violence—and more in the classroom. In this article, we share an interactive read-aloud lesson plan template that we designed as an assignment for our elementary pre-service teachers (PSTs). Prior to our collaboration, both instructors were using read-aloud assignments for different purposes in our respective courses. In Brittany's course, PSTs designed read-aloud lessons to meet English Language Arts objectives in the primary grades. In Annemarie's course, PSTs designed culturally responsive read-alouds in order to validate and affirm student identities. And while the PSTs were successful at both assignments in their respective courses, they didn't naturally make the leap to using culturally relevant texts to discuss social issues while teaching discrete reading skills (e.g., decoding print). Thus, we sought to design an assignment that ran across both courses that would explicitly connect the seemingly disparate concepts.

This seemingly minor adjustment nonetheless had a noticeable impact on how PSTs conceptualized and enacted the read-aloud lessons. We observed a growth in their awareness of the cultural undercurrents of curriculum design as well as more explicit connections between reading methods instruction and literacy strategies that facilitate dialogue about critical social issues and social justice advocacy (for more about our PSTs' growth, see Adams & Kaczmarczyk, 2021). Given the marked insight, understanding, and meaning construction PSTs demonstrated regarding culturally situated reading instruction, we believe this reimagined classroom practice may be of interest to practicing teachers as well.

Start Courageous Conversations Early

Bettina Love (2019) describes abolitionist teaching as "choosing to engage in the struggle for educational justice knowing that you have the ability and human right to refuse oppression and refuse to oppress others, mainly your students" (p. 11). Collectively, we must recognize and accept that educators play a central role in the perpetuation of racism in society. Research has illuminated the myriad ways in which teachers' implicit biases and discourse work against the potentially transformative effects of culturally relevant and anti-racist pedagogy (Hollingworth, 2009; Mason, 2017). This means taking a hard look at ourselves and our teaching to investigate the ways in which we potentially enact and reify racism in the classroom and beyond. While this work is personal and often deeply uncomfortable, it is essential. Approximately 80% of the country's teaching force is made up of middle-class white women (Loewus, 2017), even though student demographics are increasingly racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. White teachers must recognize the power they hold in school spaces and wield it equitably by finding ways to deconstruct power ideologies and integrate the diverse voices and everyday experiences of the children we teach (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Schrodt et al., 2015).

While it is natural to want to shield young learners from harsh realities, the primary grades are the ideal place to start facilitating these discussions. As early as preschool, children exhibit racial bias, demonstrating a greater preference for white skin tones over any other (Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009; Shutts, 2015). However, those biases evolve as students are educated on racial literacy (Vera et al., 2016). Furthermore, given the current social climate, it is highly likely that students are already being indirectly exposed to discussions on race and racism. Thus, directly addressing racial biases and engaging in racial literacy is crucial (Priest et al., 2016). Having these conversations early and often will raise students' consciousness so that they can recognize and respond to issues of race and racism when they occur, both in and outside the classroom.

Picture Books as Conversation Starters

Many educators are familiar with Bishop's (1990) metaphor in which children's literature functions as metaphorical windows through which young readers can access views and experiences of the world that they would otherwise never know and mirrors by which readers can better understand their own experiences as part of a larger human experience. Children's literature can provide students with vivid snapshots of current and historical social issues (Botelho & Rudman, 2010; Mathis, 2020). Recent research supports the idea that reading builds social understanding in readers, improving their ability to empathize and sympathize with other's thoughts, feelings, and actions (Taylor et al, 2017; Kozak & Recchia, 2019). Furthermore, literature that focuses on or highlights social issues

can benefit students by creating space for critical dialogue and exchanging ideas, enabling them to unpack the roles of power and privilege in society and their own lives (Gopalakrishnan, 2010). Even when conflicting interpretations occur, such disagreements can be a springboard for digging deeper into issues and perspectives (Van Horn, 2015).

Thus, primary teachers are ideally situated to address race and racism by employing appropriate picture books. Picture books can illuminate power systems and challenge stereotypes in complex and multifaceted ways; they can "invite students to resist the dominant discourse on social issues while gaining intercultural insights" (Mathis, 2020, p. 103). Before reading, teachers can prime students for these discussions by activating their background knowledge and ideas about concepts such as fairness, equity, opportunity, and agency. Using thematically linked texts, teachers can invite readers to talk across several books, posing critical questions, such as: Whose perspectives are shared and whose are missing? Which characters have power and which do not? What do you think the author is trying to say to us? (Short et al., 2017). Following partner or small-group discussions, thoughts can be shared with the whole-group.

Read-Alouds Can Meet Multiple Curricular Goals

Although read-alouds are but one tool in a teacher's toolbox, they are infinitely versatile. Fountas and Pinnell (2016) define the interactive read-aloud as "a whole-group instructional context in which you read aloud a selected text to the whole class, occasionally and selectively pausing for conversation" (p. 12). The pauses facilitate thinking about, talking about, and responding to the text so that students are actively processing the language and meaning of the text throughout the reading. Many teachers already use read-alouds in flexible ways to meet their curricular goals, particularly for reading instruction. Read-alouds and text talk can have meaningful impact on literacy skills such as listening, speaking, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Hollie, 2018). Discussions of social issues such as race and racism can easily be integrated into read-alouds designed to accomplish reading goals.

As Maria Walther (2019) puts it, "It makes sense to take advantage of the instructional opportunities that a read aloud presents" (p. 1). She identifies several socio-culturally focused reasons for reading aloud, including that it fosters a sense of classroom community, sparks conversation, opens windows to other worlds, and encourages perspective-taking and empathy. We advocate for you to use this available tool to promote students' racial literacy as well. Pairing powerful literacy instruction with texts that invite discussion about race and social justice "can aid teachers in facilitating these much-needed conversations" (Kaczmarczyk et al., 2018, p. 524).

But Remember, Not All Books Are Created Equal

Read-alouds occur daily in classrooms across the country. They are a versatile tool that reinforce a number of literacy skills and can reach across various content areas. When utilizing read-alouds to lead crucial and courageous conversations around racial equity and social issues, picking the right book is key. State-mandated books aligned to curriculum may appear authentic, but they are "primarily representative of the institutional hegemony" (Hollie, 2018, p.145). For example, including a main character who is Black, Indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC) does not necessarily mean the book has the cultural consciousness to invite authentic conversation about race and issues surrounding racial equity. Peter Golenblock's *Teammates* (1992) tells the story of Pee Wee Reese's support of Jackie Robinson while he was playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers. While the story shares an important example of an individual standing up for another, the book is authored by a white man and celebrates Robinson's white teammate. Students get only a snapshot of what Robinson's experiences with racism were, as the story centers predominantly on Reese's discomfort. Classroom teachers must actively plan to supplement such texts with more culturally responsive ones. In this case, the book *Testing the Ice: A True Story of Jackie Robinson* (2009), written by his daughter, Sharon Robinson, would be an option.

Hollie (2018) posits that, "supplementing mainstream text with culturally responsive resources hinges completely on the selection process" (p. 145). Annemarie tasks her students with locating a book for their read-aloud assignment using Hollie's (2018) three types of culturally responsive texts as a guidepost: culturally authentic, culturally generic, and culturally neutral.

Culturally generic and neutral texts feature characters of various racial identities but contain superficial details about the character or are drenched with traditional mainstream themes. These texts often reinforce stereotypes or lack the depth to begin crucial conversations. While these texts can be used for text-to-self connections, they often do not dive deep enough into the struggles certain racial and cultural groups have endured. PSTs are encouraged to pick culturally *authentic* texts. These texts, whether nonfiction or fiction, illuminate the genuine cultural experiences of a specific cultural group. Within a culturally authentic text, one cultural group cannot be swapped for another without jeopardizing the integrity of the story and the experiences within (Hollie, 2018).

Since the death of George Floyd and an increased awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement, a multitude of resources have been shared to support educators in their pursuit of addressing race and racism in the classroom. Book lists

have been shared via social media and other websites that feature more main characters who are BIPOC. Some examples are:

- 30 Children's Books About Diversity That Celebrate our Differences: https://bookriot.com/50-childrens-books-about-diversity-2/
- Twelve Books to Help Children Understand Race, Anti-Racism and Protest: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/twelve-books-to-help-children-understand-race-antiracism-and-protest-180975067/
- 23 Books to Help Kids of All Ages Learn About Race: https://www.self.com/gallery/childrens-books-on-race

However, with an abundance of new resources and book lists available, it is important to keep in mind that not all books featuring BIPOC are created equal. It is up to teachers to ask themselves if a book is truly culturally authentic. In order to do this, they must do the work first. Read and assess the book to see if cultural experiences are genuine and not stereotypical. The chosen book should not only be capable of teaching literacy skills but also promote courageous conversations with students.

You've Picked Your Book, Now What?

Traditionally, PSTs enrolled in Annemarie's course find a culturally authentic text aligned to current standards and/or topics taught within a field placement classroom during the semester. Due to COVID-19, the structure of field placements for Fall 2020 was ever-changing and could not be predicted. Even if physical placement within a classroom remained unclear, PSTs enrolled in both Brittany's and Annemarie's courses were still required to complete the read-aloud assignment. The lack of concrete placements allowed for more flexibility with book selection and standard alignment. The lesson plan template below outlines the components required for the assignment.

Along with state-specific ELA standards, PSTs were required to align 1-2 Social Justice standards to their read aloud. The Social Justice standards provided by Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance) are K-12 anchor standards divided into four domains: identity, diversity, justice, and action. The standards are written in age-appropriate language and can be used to guide lesson plan development to engage teachers and students in discussions based around anti-bias behavior and social justice issues (Learning for Justice, n.d.). These standards are a great place to start when trying to develop/plan out courageous conversations in the classroom. After selecting and prereading their text, PSTs then identify a Social Justice Standard, or two, that they feel aligns with their learning objective and the discussion questions they curate. With only 20 standards from which to select, it is not a daunting task to find one that can fit the scope of a lesson.

While courageous conversations around race and racism may happen organically in the classroom, the authors hope that the template below can help teachers identify spaces within a read-aloud where students can be prompted to reflect upon and talk about these topics. Conversations can begin prior to or during the read-aloud and should continue after the story has concluded. Although the template provided is designed as a one-off lesson, the concept can easily be expanded or connected to corresponding in-class activities and projects. As well, teachers could select thematically related text sets and encourage students to read across the texts with the courageous conversation in mind. Regardless, the key is to start those conversations, to explicitly make space in your classroom for those conversations to occur and to maintain a classroom culture that invites such conversations.

Lesson Plan Template

Title of Text:	**Grade Level:**
Focus: *What courageous conversation will you be having?*	
Benchmarks	English Language Arts Standard(s): *Example: LAFS.1.RL.1.3 Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details* Learning for Justice Social Justice Standard(s): *Example*: *DI.K-2.7 I can describe some ways that I am similar to and different from people who share my identities and those who have other identities.*
Instructional Format	*Whole class, Small group, Partner, Individual, etc.*
Learning Objective(s)	*Example: Students will be able to recall major events in a narrative story.* *Example: Students will be able to identify ways in which their culture is similar to and different from characters in a narrative story.*
Materials	*What materials will you need to engage students in learning?*

Part 1: Before Reading *Introducing the text helps guide students in creating a purpose for listening to the story.*
Pick the Text
• *Is the text culturally authentic?* • *Does this text support the focus of your courageous conversation?* • *How does the text align with your learning objectives?*

Introduce the Text
• *How will you set a purpose and help students understand why this lesson is important to them as learners?* • *How will you pique their interest or curiosity regarding the text's topic?* • *How will you activate and build on prior knowledge and experiences related to the topic? Try a picture walk!*
Introduce the Learning Objective(s)
• *How will you directly explain the learning objectives?* • *How will you explain why these objectives are important to understand or be able to do?*
Part 2: During Reading *Read the story in parts, pausing to ask questions that compel students to actively listen and process the text. In your planning, you need to decide the appropriate places to stop to ask questions.*
Model
• *How will you model how a good reader uses the literacy skill? Try using a think aloud to demonstrate this!* • *How will you model thinking about the Learning for Justice (LJ) objective? This is a good place to initiate your courageous conversation.*
Stopping Point #1
• *Where in the text will you pause to think aloud or discuss the literacy skill and LJ objective?*
Stopping Point #2
• *Where in the text will you pause to think aloud or discuss the literacy skill and LJ objective?*
Stopping Point #3
• *Where in the text will you pause to think aloud or discuss the literacy skill and LJ objective?*
Part 3: After Reading
Reflecting on the Learning for Justice Objective
• *How will you prompt students to reflect on the story? What connections to the LJ objective can they make? How will you continue your courageous conversation?*
Reflecting on Literacy Skill
• *How will you prompt students to reflect on their use of the literacy skill? What connections to the ELA objective can you make? What connections to the ELA objective can they make?*
Part 4: Activity/Assessment

Choose an activity or assessment that will provide you with knowledge of students' mastery of the objectives, including what students took away from the courageous conversation. (You may need more than one activity to accomplish this.)
Assessment/Activity:
• How will students show they met the lesson objectives? *What do the students do?* • How will you know if students have successfully met the lesson objectives? *What are you looking for?* • What are your next steps for students who do not successfully meet the lesson objectives?
Lesson Plan Support
• *What instructional supports will you use during the lesson to address diverse learning needs for all students to successfully meet lesson objectives? This should include accommodation strategies and differentiation strategies.* • *How can you continue to reinforce and support students' understanding and skill acquisition after the lesson is over?*

Conclusion

"If we as teachers truly believe that all children can learn and are entitled to the very best opportunities to reach their full potential, racism must be considered a barrier to reaching this goal for students of color" (Kaczmarczyk et al., 2018, p. 528). Conversations about racism can begin with the implementation of successful read-alouds. Picking the right book, aligning it to chosen standards, and outlining appropriate questions and discussion points can transform your daily read-aloud into not only a lesson in literacy skills, but a time to encourage courageous conversations that students and teachers must have in today's climate (Walther, 2019). While read-alouds are not the only tool classroom teachers should use, they can effectively immerse students into events they may not personally experience and introduce them to characters they may not have a chance to interact with based on their own backgrounds and upbringing. The right book can encourage them to empathize with children and families from differing cultural backgrounds, and assist in critical observations and conversations around race, racism, and issues of equity (Gopalakrishnan, 2010; Kozak & Recchia, 2019; Taylor, et al., 2017).

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