

More than Words: Teacher Candidates Turn and Talk about the Hidden Messages in Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT: Multicultural education curriculum often seems to get lost in the implicit biases of formal education. As K-12 classrooms continue to increase in linguistic, cultural, racial, gender, socioeconomic, and ability diversity, the call for educators to develop mind frames of equity becomes more urgent. This study asks teacher candidates to explore children's literature for overt and covert messages of oppression, silencing, and indoctrination. Each theme is discussed within the context of picture books and their corresponding analysis. A suggested chart for selecting critically intelligent books is provided as a consolidated extension of the study's findings.

KEYWORDS: Multicultural education, k-12 classrooms, hidden curriculum, critical literacy, teacher preparation

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The concept of the hidden curriculum is not new. Giroux and Penna (1979) shaped our understanding of what it means to oppress, silence, and indoctrinate students through covert messages. The messages, whether intentional or not, become so indisputably accepted and internalized that critical critique rarely surfaces, thereby stifling access and belonging and reproducing social stratification.

(Un)intentional Messages

In 1980, Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch theorized that expectations on specific characteristics transferred from the larger social context to the classroom.

These are discussed in the literature as “expectation states.” First, status is defined through characteristics with organized attitudes and beliefs (age, race, (dis)ability, language, gender, ethnicity, level of education, occupation, physical attractiveness, and intelligence quotient). These characteristics are evaluated based on honor, esteem, or desirability and are accompanied by expectations on how to perform and behave (expectation states). Social expectations are then transferred from the larger context to any situation, making social interactions difficult when participants have characteristics that are not valued by members in the given context. In social situations, groups carry over their external statuses into the interactions with a new group. Often, even the most well-intentioned educators create imbalances in adult-initiated and student-initiated learning where students have little control over their learning experiences (California Department of Education, 2019). For instance, discriminatory characteristics and expectations that position students with (dis)abilities as verbally incompetent result in “others speaking for them.” This means that social inequities occurring outside the group, in the larger social context perhaps, are maintained inside the group through spaces of constraint (e.g., curriculum) and discretion (e.g., classroom interactions) (Ball, 2018).

Although the literature has long established that an education based on a critical pedagogical foundation helps students connect to content and academically achieve (Keesing-Styles, 2003; McLaren, 1988), classrooms of today are still plagued by the latent messages produced by expectation states, the one-size-fits-all curricula, and even by teacher-selected ancillary material used to supplement, to differentiate, and to, ironically, meet the needs of students. Despite efforts to challenge indoctrinating notions such as the Great Books Curriculum as essential foundation, instances of the hidden curriculum continue to permeate. In this study, teacher candidates deconstruct and analyze that which hides between the lines of children’s literature by engaging in situated and dialogical processes. Within these dynamics, teacher candidates begin to build their own frameworks of equity, that is, processes that recognize, respond, and redress biases and move towards more sustainable and equitable learning environments (Gorski, 2019). I argue that representing the voices of children and their communities cannot be accomplished without an authentic framework of equity and, therefore, it was important to explore if and how teacher candidates were able to decipher the meaning behind the text.

The Study

The project was inspired by the eloquent words of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), who said, “it is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly.... A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come in contact with another foreign meaning” (p. 7). The literature analysis in which the teacher candidates participated allowed for this juxtaposition, by confronting their own indoctrinated beliefs against the representations of people in

children's literature and onward to a more evolved way of understanding our realities and those of others. The study was approached with one research question in mind: How do teacher candidates approach literature selection – for sheer entertainment, sans-autonomy, or with a critical mindset?

Data included observational notes from the course professor and classroom dialogues and artifacts from 97 participants in a multiple subject teacher certification program across four cohorts. All teacher candidates who attended class were given the opportunity to participate in the literature analysis. This is one of many classroom activities they engaged in as part of their multicultural education. During the analysis, teacher candidates were guided by two questions: How and where will students in your class find themselves in the texts you select? How and where will they learn about cultures, experiences, and identities different from their own? Data were analyzed by engaging in traditional thematic analysis (Seale, 2004), using the “lumper” coding approach to conceptually represent each corresponding excerpt (Saldaña, 2009). These qualitative data provided a rich context for understanding the challenges and opportunities and recognizing the importance of research as a matter of understanding as opposed to “proving.”

Learnings

Bravely and unknowingly, teacher candidates selected literature commonly found on the shelves of elementary classroom libraries.¹ The purpose of the activity was to examine – critically, deeply, and intentionally – the messages of the books. Some teacher candidates chose award-winning books like *Miss Rumphius* (Cooney, 1985); some chose to engage with content-based books such as *Sir Cumference* (Neuschwander, 1997); and others opted for familiar stories from their childhoods such as *Skippyjon Jones* (Schachner, 2005). As groups enthusiastically read their books, they began to realize the messages that many of these at-first-glance neutral books hid within their words. “Ask yourself the hard questions and read between the lines,” the professor insisted. Soon, questions about whose lives counted, who was given voice, how language was used to develop character, imbalances of power, and secondary stories rose to the top of the group conversations. The sections that follow visit the most prominent themes that emerged.

Trivializing the Other

Bourdieu (1991) asserts that language is not only an instrument of communication, but an instrument of power. When the highly rated and recognized (E.B. White Read Aloud Award) *Skippyjon Jones* (Schachner, 2005) came out of the professor's bag, many teacher candidates became quite excited – reminiscing about a popular childhood read about a Siamese cat who does not resemble his family members and, therefore, believes he is a Chihuahua. The book depicts a

series of adventures that he undertakes with his Chihuahua friends, Los Chimichangos.

After critically engaging with the book, it quickly became clear to those who had encountered this book in childhood how ingrained in their own subconscious the trivialization and characterization of entire cultures had become. *Skippyjon Jones*, the Siamese cat, uses his “*very best Spanish accent*” (p. 8) to say things like “*my ears are too beeg for my head*” (p. 8), “*My name is Skipp-ito Frisk-ito, I get the job done, yes indeed-o*” (p. 9), “*why the mask-ito?*” (p. 13), “*Adios to the bumblebee-to!*” (p. 15), “*bang-ito, crash-ito, pop-ito*” (p. 22) as he encounters “bean-eating bandits” (p. 17) who like beans and wear sombreros.

Several elements of this story were discussed as mechanisms that perpetuate stereotypically simplified cultural and linguistic aspects of people from Mexico. The teacher candidates, who had been learning about translanguaging in the classroom as a deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire (Otheguy et al., 2015), felt that the attempt to add the letter “o” as a suffix to English words and the insertion of scattered Spanish words within the storyline lacked purpose and promoted a deficit idea of how bilingual students use their languages to communicate parts of their identities. Teacher candidates had learned that the term translanguaging (Trawsieithu – the Welsh term coined by Cen Williams) was an opportunity for them to construct planned and systematically-driven instruction using English (the dominant language in the United States) and the home languages of their bilingual students (commonly Spanish), thereby honoring their entire linguistic abilities in classrooms.

However, the forms of linguistic mockery that *Skippyjon Jones* engaged with devalued the home languages many students, specifically English learners, bring to their classrooms and promoted the purist and assimilation-based ideologies that many education stakeholders enact through their practices and educational programming (Archev, 2019). Silencing was automatically revealed through the linguistic trivialization of the *other*.

Language as a Vehicle of Status Positioning

In another award-winning book, *Miss Rumphius* (Cooney, 1985) (American Book Award), the main character – an affluent white woman – fulfills her grandfather's request of making the world more beautiful by traveling the world and spreading lupine seeds. In this story, *Miss Rumphius* controlled every single space of the storyline, both in presence and script, and other characters took on supporting roles. In many ways, this book depicts how language is used to develop character. Power was noted repeatedly in who held the load of the conversation. During the main character's travels, alone, the minoritized characters had a total of ten dialogue words as opposed to the fifty-nine dialogue words of the dominant-culture character. The main character's dialogue appeared to position her in

superior ranking and with more developed language proficiency as she carried the weight of the dialogue in the interactions with the minoritized characters.

Semantically, the meaning behind the language used also surfaced in the analysis. As the main character navigated her travels to different islands, she asked the Bapa Raja to “*fetch her a coconut*” (Cooney, 1985, p. 12). This is possibly a depiction of regional vernacular but, to a careful reader, the choice in the word *fetch* for a person in a formal situation may border a derogatory intention. As the main character continued her travels, the reader encounters what the author refers to as the “*Land of the Lotus-Eaters*” (Cooney, 1985, p. 13). Although, similarly referenced in *The Odyssey* by Homer, this is not the 8th century and the teacher candidates believed that there was no need to use dated-terminology to refer to people from Tunisia. These textual micro-aggressions catapulted the minoritized characters into inferior positions.

Glazing over Historic Complexity

A Fine Dessert (Jenkins, 2015), a Caldecott Award contender, tells the story of a dessert that makes its way through history. Along its journey, the book takes the reader back to the slave era of the United States where a slave and her daughter prepare the dessert for their masters – during which the dessert is the focus and slavery is the afterthought. This approach to slavery as a side issue propagates historical illiteracy. The indifference given to the topic of slavery communicates to young readers a false sense of representation because it fails to hold space for authentic conversations about segregation, racial discrimination, and deficit and meritocracy-based ideologies. At the end of the book the author writes a note stating that “*this story includes characters who are slaves, even though there is by no means space to explore the topic of slavery fully, I wanted to represent American life in 1810 without ignoring that part of our history*” (p. 33). The teacher candidates found this note appalling. They believed it to be a form of ingenuine apology that came “after the fact” to justify the erasure of history.

Teaching about slavery is difficult, but also the reason why it needs to be done right. For teacher candidates, this was concerning for two intertwined reasons. Children at very young ages situate their identities within the identities of literary characters and so texts become both social and cultural tools (Fisher, 2010). For children, history communicates powerful messages about where they came from and, to an extent, who they are.

Imbalances of Power

In the book, *Roads and Bridges* (Carr, 1999), Rob – a young boy in a wheelchair – and his friends engage in play around a sandbox. Interestingly, Rob takes on a lesser role as he pretends to be the bulldozer making roads and bridges

and ultimately completing tasks that the other children request of him. In a sense, Rob and his friends are parallel playing – playing side by side, but without authentic group involvement. Although it has been said that parallel play is an important transitory stage for two-three years old children (Parten, 1932), Rob and his friends are significantly older – possibly 7-10 years old. Who holds the power in this seemingly innocent event? Definitely not Rob, as the power-prestige order of his lesser honored, esteemed, or desirable characteristics were accompanied by expectations on how to perform and behave (Berger et al., 1980) with other children. In another book, *Will Power* (Powell, 2000), the teacher candidates came across Will and his friends as they head to the beach. Will, a boy in a wheelchair is not able to access the beach and stays behind. As he looks through his binoculars, he notices a girl drowning and, because he was on the hilltop, he was able to call for help on a nearby phone. One teacher candidate facetiously said, “*Oh, but apparently it’s ok to exclude him because he will be a hero at the end of the book.*” Social inequalities occurring in text can be dangerously recreated by children and create imbalances of power in interactions. For Rob and Will and children that share their characteristics (e.g., using a wheelchair), exclusion and/or integration replace opportunities for inclusion and belonging.

Reinforcing Patterns of Normality

Repeated messages promote reinforcement. Those messages, through assimilation and accommodation (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), build schemata which in turn become natural parts of ideological positioning. In *Sir Cumference and the Great Knight of Angleland* (Neuschwander, 1997), a young boy embarks on a geometric quest to find a missing king. The teacher candidates noted that the resonating message of the text was that heroes and mathematicians had to meet three identity attributes: male, wealthy, and of European descent. Ironically, one of the white male teacher candidates was recognized as being represented in the book. As comedically as this was initially to the group, it was also important to note that it was not a coincidence and that minoritized students are rarely represented in ways that honor their realities, identities, and abilities.

All children have mathematical endowment, but books such as *Sir Cumference and the Great Knight of Angleland* continue to dismiss the diverse mathematical expressions that are already too frequently ignored in formal education. This often leads to socially reproduced hegemonic norms that position certain ways to doing math as more valuable and certain people as good mathematicians - male, wealthy, of European decent. Repetition of what is deemed normal quickly transitions as neutral. When messages become neutral, they are rarely noticed and, in instances in which they are noticed, they are rarely addressed critically

Stereotyping as a Mechanism of Reproducing the Narrative

In the wake of anti-immigration rhetoric, the insolent process of stereotyping entire groups of people was identified in the analysis of the *Five Chinese Brothers* (Bishop, 1938, reissued in 1996) (received the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1959). Teacher candidates noted how repetition of character traits was used to label people. Such repeated traits on the five brothers included the bright yellow coloration of all the Chinese characters depicted in the story – ignoring the storied history of racism and resistance related to color assignments and the continuous labeling of the *other*. In the story, the five brothers, each with their own unique talent, were difficult to imprison, kill, drown, and burn. One group of teacher candidates mentioned that the message when observed superficially – from a stereotypical and uncritical lens – was that “*there are so many Asians that you can’t get rid of them.*” Human beings are not plague; they are also not categories. From this, a discussion on stereotyping emerged – are positive stereotypes bad too? According to the teacher candidates, the answer was yes, because stereotypes reduce people to labels. Overgeneralized categories and the process of using stereotypes to understand and engage with entire groups of people is a lazy approach to relating to people. Another teacher candidate incredulously asked about the relevance of this 1938 book in classrooms of today – wondering if it was still being published. This book is not only widely available online, but also in brick-and-mortar stores, such as World Market where it had been spotted by another teacher candidate.

Onward Towards a More Culturally Intelligent Approach

During the process of deconstructing and co-constructing viewpoints to understand each other’s lived worlds through dialogue, some teacher candidates experienced deep connections with peers that shared similar experiences, others resisted the idea that oppression, silencing, and indoctrination could possibly be transferred to young readers from books, and others felt confused about how to begin a critical search for better books. As the purpose of this study unfolded, it was important to honor the multicultural perspective by re-envisioning a different narrative. Social imagination (Greene, 1995; Spector et al., 2017) enabled us to do this through a process of understanding the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner lives and external experiences of a variety of individuals. It also propelled a more actionable step toward equity. As a step in this direction, I have proposed a chart for text selection that includes learnings from the study guide and offers some considerations when making decisions about children’s literature (see Figure 1). This chart gives educational stakeholders (teachers, teacher educators, curriculum designers, parents) an opportunity to reflect on students as human beings who exist in a complex web of systems in and out of classrooms. As educational stakeholders navigate this chart with a book in mind, they are asked to consider the appropriateness of it in terms of students’

backgrounds, identities, lifestyles, languages, and realities. It is an exercise of intentionality – to stop, think, and make a choice.

Figure 1

Chart for Selecting Culturally Intelligent Books

	Appropriate	Reconsider
Author Background and Alignment to the Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Author writes from a cultural and a personal context; or • Author makes their positionality clear and does not speak for other identities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Author appropriates a narrative that is not theirs without exposing their limitations and/or biases.
Character Identities and Lifestyles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characters are representative of students' identities and backgrounds; and • Are articulate, have dynamic speech, and give their points of view. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invisibility – no representation of diverse identities and backgrounds; or • Tokenism – only one character of any group; and/or • Othering – character is portrayed in a deficit and/or exotic lens (oversimplified, stereotyped, inaccurate, and/or only in a supporting role).
Linguistic Positionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language and overall word choice are used to honor and value identities rather than demean and/or establish hierarchy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Derogatory language; and/or • Imbalances of dominant group voice and diverse group silencing are present.
Storyline and Students' Complex Realities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expands and deepens experiences that are ordinarily unseen and/or unknown dimensions of diverse experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplification and reproduction of stereotypes as truths across ways of living for specific cultures, societies, etc.
Offers Opportunities to Critically Dialogue (must be facilitated by a critically conscious educator)	<p>Opportunities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • raise questions about lived worlds; • examine and reexamine readers' own systems, models, prejudices; • think more deeply about how identity is being constructed; • juxtapose new beginnings arising from emerging awareness of both difference and possibility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different and/or diverse identities are positioned as problems that need to be tested; • Person with the undermined identity needs to prove their value; • Other identities later accept/recognize that the undermined identity has something to contribute culturally or ideologically.

Conclusion

In this study, the teacher candidates learned quickly that sustaining equitable environments meant having a heightened sense of critical consciousness and that the development of an equity mind frame was a continuous practice in surfacing inequities because, after all, justice is found in the details – that is, in the words that represent more than just words on a page. The need for consideration of texts means that we first begin to understand that high-quality books are more than just grade-level texts and more than just standards-aligned texts. High-quality books are critically-intelligent – they promote critically-conscious reading of diversity by examining inequities such as the ones uncovered by the teacher candidates in this study: trivialization of others, inequitable language positioning, reinforcing patterns of normality, glazing over historical complexity, imbalances of power, stereotyping as a mechanism of reproducing the narrative, and lack of potential to critically dialogue.

For some educational stakeholders, this work is already being done. For others, the work is just beginning. In the previous section I presented a chart. The purpose of the chart is two-fold. First, as a point to anchor conversations about hegemony, dominance, belonging, and equity. Second, as an action-oriented practice to support decisions about texts that create learning spaces where students' worth and agency are nurtured.

Notes

1. Picture books used in this study:

- A Fine Dessert: Four Centuries, Four Families, One Delicious Dessert (Jenkins, 2015)
- The Five Chinese Brothers (Bishop, 1938)
- Miss Rumphius (Cooney, 1985)
- Roads and Bridges (Carr, 1999)
- Skippyjon Jones (Schachner, 2005)
- Sir Cumference and the Great Knight of Angleland (Neuschwander, 1997)
- Will Power (Powell, 2000)

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