Creating Multicultural Community Spaces for All Children: Transformative Read-Alouds in the Early Childhood Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how instruction for students from linguistically and culturally diverse families can be enhanced by the literacy practice of transformative read-alouds, which teachers can utilize to create a sense of community within the classroom for all children. Transformative read-alouds are especially beneficial for refugee and immigrant students because they emphasize the use of peer connections and equitable instruction. The article discusses methods for creating transformative read-alouds and presents a vignette of a transactional read-aloud in an early childhood classroom. The use of oral language, drawing, and writing is also modeled.

Key Words: community spaces, equitable instruction, early childhood, transformative, read-alouds, critical literacy, diversity

A Multicultural Early Childhood Classroom Community: A Vignette of a Transformative Read-Aloud

In teacher Emma's Kindergarten class, three students were born in Mexico, four students were born in Honduras, and another four children were born in the United States—however, their parents are immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. These students speak English on many different levels and have direct or indirect experiences with the immigration process, and some have relatives whose

status is currently unknown. The remainder of the class comprises five monolingual native English speakers.

Emma begins each day with by ensuring that all children feel safe in her classroom, which she thinks of as a community space for her students. She begins each day with a transformative read-aloud. Today, she has selected to read Migrant by Maxine Trottier. This book features Anna, a child of Mennonites from Mexico, who migrate north in the spring to harvest fruits and vegetables and then return south in the fall. Throughout the book, Emma points to the illustrations, which depict Anna's longing to feel deeply rooted in the earth, watching the seasons come and go. The text expresses the character's yearning to live in one place, forever, in one community.

During the read-aloud, Emma purposefully points out the illustrations, which support the themes of the story. For example, at various points in the story, Anna feels like a jackrabbit in an abandoned burrow because her family occupies an empty farmhouse near the fields, and sometimes like a kitten, as she shares a bed with her sisters. During the read-aloud, Emma relates her own experiences with her class, "When I was young, my sisters and I slept in one bed. We had to move around a lot, so we went to different schools. That is why the night times were the best; I felt very connected to my sister." Emma can draw a picture of her shared anecdote with the class and write the words out on a large chart paper, creating an interactive writing experience.

Emma allows time for spontaneous reactions from the students, verbally or through drawing and writing. When Emma first introduced the transformative read-aloud, she provided her students with appropriate writing paper for early childhood students, as well as pencils or crayons. It takes time for all students to feel comfortable sharing; therefore, Emma is consistent with her instruction. By sharing her own experiences and reactions to the book, she creates a classroom where children are comfortable taking emotional and academic risks.

As Emma continues to read-aloud, Marc softly says, "I miss my dad." Maria turns to him and responds, "I know, I get scared a lot, too." At this point, Emma asks the children if they would like to have a few moments to speak to each other or draw and write. During these five minutes, one child approaches Emma and asks to look at the pictures. Then, he begins to illustrate a story and writes a few words next to it. Emma quietly asks him if he wants to share; he tells her that he will "think about it."

Introduction

Shifts in demographics are changing the face of the world. In 2020, the total number of people forcibly displaced from their homes rose to 72.5 million, with 28.3 million categorized as refugees (United Nations High Commissioner

for Refugees, 2020). Additionally, the U.S. public school system has undergone a "demographic milestone" (Mitchell, 2018). The Pew Research Center (cited in Tamer, 2014) stated that one out of every four children in the U.S. is an immigrant or the U.S.-born child of immigrants and estimated that by 2050, a third of the nation's school children younger than 17 will either be immigrants themselves or the children of at least one parent who is. To address this demographic milestone, schools will need to rethink classroom strategies, family engagement practices, and how to best understand the diverse communities from which children come. Budiman (2020) reported that the U.S. has more immigrants than any other country in the world—one-fifth of the U.S. population consists of migrants, and one out of every four of those number are young children. Therefore, improving racial/ethnic relations and attenuating stereotypes based on immigration should be a primary goal for all schools.

Refugee and immigrant children's educational needs differ from those of other students; many of these children have experienced trauma and frequent interruptions to their education (Crawford & Dorner, 2019). Public schools and educators are uniquely positioned to provide support for immigrant students. The U.S. National Teacher of the Year for 2018, Mandy Manning, spoke at a Migration Policy Institute conference. Manning (2018) stated, "Teachers need to be compassionate and open to the needs of immigrant and refugee students and create instruction that reflects their needs" (p. 7). Further, Manning described an ongoing situation in her school in which students have been asking when they or their parents will be forced to leave the country.

Nationwide, 1.6 million children under the age of five have at least one undocumented parent (Gándara & Ee, 2018, p. 3). Many of these young immigrant children are entering schools for the first time, which tends to be a difficult transition because they are typically closely connected to their families and may have shared traumatic experiences (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2018). The climate in today's schools for many children and their families is one of fear; many of these fears are not entirely unfounded. Despite a policy prohibiting engagement in immigration enforcement in schools (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2020), numerous incidents have been reported (Rein et al., 2017). For example, planned enforcement action was carried out during morning drop-off in plain view of students and families (Phillips, 2017). The potential reach of these concerns is substantial. Gándara and Ee (2018) estimated that more than five million children in U.S. cities reside with parents affected by U.S. immigration policies and reported that parents of children ages 3 to 8 who completed their survey (N = 3,800) reported a fear of immigration enforcement authorities.

Immigrant children have reported their biggest fear is losing their parents; some children may have already experienced a family member's loss. Early childhood experiences contribute to young children's sense of self-efficacy about their ability to succeed in school (Hoffman, 2011). Children who are immigrants may be especially vulnerable during these early schooling experiences, as they are only beginning to develop an understanding of how they fit into their family, culture, and community. Furthermore, many young children of immigrants may face negative school biases during this formative period (Hoffman, 2011).

Creating Multicultural Communities

Research suggests that students who are confident in their cultural and ethnic identity can buffer the impact of discrimination on their well-being (Gamboa et al., 2018; Hattan & Lupo, 2020). Recent media attention to the global humanitarian crisis has emphasized the importance of creating inclusive and multicultural experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, to serve the diverse student populations attending our schools (Ward & Warren, 2020), as the practices that schools adopt can ameliorate negative outcomes for immigrant children. By creating classrooms and schools in which students and parents feel part of a community, educators help students feel valued in school and therefore motivated to do well academically (Redding et al., 2011). Community building also helps the students and parents feel like the school and the neighborhood is an important part of their lives (Roxas, 2020).

The multicultural classroom starts with the teacher understanding students on an individual basis, including the families and communities in which they live. When the teacher takes the time to demonstrate a sincere interest in learning about each student, on a one-to-one basis, students will begin to establish trust and a bond will form (Nieto, 2018). Students will come to see that each student is acknowledged and respected; this will allow for more opportunities for students to feel comfortable talking with their peers in the class, and communication is what creates and strengthens the multicultural classroom community (Nestor et al., 2021).

Literacy Instruction to Help Build Community

Another method to create classrooms that are safe, equitable, community spaces is by carefully crafting literacy instruction. A specific and targeted way to achieve this goal is to adopt culturally responsive literacy instruction (Au, 2011; García & Kleifgen, 2018). Such practices can range from choosing multicultural books to be featured in classroom libraries to the discussions that teachers have about books with their students. Researchers who study children's literature have articulated the need for using a critical lens to examine the

books teachers choose for read-aloud sessions. Au (2011) encourages teachers to reflect on the following when choosing books: Who does the telling in the story? Who are the stories about? and Who (or what groups) get left out? These questions align with social constructivism when teaching reading (Vygotsky, 1978). Souto-Manning (2020) uses sociocultural theory to demonstrate that discerning meaning is more than a cognitive act; it is instead socially and culturally constructed. Comprehension involves three elements influenced by the sociocultural context: the reader, the text, and the activity of reading itself (Rosenblatt, 1985).

When teachers adopt a sociocultural perspective in their classroom literacy instruction, they include multicultural literacy practices, emphasizing the fundamental role of the social and community context in academic and social development (Vaquez, 2017). Another important aspect of Vygotsky's (e.g., 1978) views on learning is the significance of language in the learning process. Embracing a sociocultural perspective in the community-based class enables dual language learners to use their cultural backgrounds when learning language and honors their first language, in situated contexts as language emerges and develops (Bakhtin, 1986).

Teachers of refugee or immigrant students must be intentional about supporting their success in U.S. schools. One way that teachers can ensure success is to ensure that these children are represented in the classroom library (García & Kleifgen, 2018). Furthermore, when teachers are mindful to choose books to echo their students' backgrounds, the stories can act as mirrors, recreating and reflecting immigrant students' personal experiences in alignment with sociocultural and multicultural theory (Souto-Manning, 2020). During the transactions between books and readers, when students see their own lives in the books that are read to them, they are more likely to feel included in the classroom community and the larger world. One way to encourage immigrant and refugee students' cultural confidence is through transformative read-alouds.

Purpose

In addition to understanding the instructional tenets and strategies required to incorporate transformative read-alouds in the multicultural community-based classroom, this article will help teachers find specific areas within the curricula to enhance and build upon their existing literacy instruction. Now more than ever, teachers must adjust their literacy and language practices to meet the needs of children whose home and school experiences are vastly different and are in need of finding a common community in their classrooms (Au, 2011; Cummins, 2001; García & Kleifgen 2018).

Utilizing sociocultural theory, educators could expand upon and reframe "the knowledge gap" (Hattan & Lupo, 2020, p. 13). Educators should be cognizant of the culture, languages, and experiences of the students in their classrooms. They must consider how students' prior knowledge will be activated and combined with new learning during literacy instruction. Towards that pursuit, Souto-Manning (2020) suggests teachers infuse multicultural literacy into their instruction. Immigrants and refugee students—indeed, all students' lives—can be changed by reading diverse literature. Additionally, teachers who adopt a sociocultural worldview can advocate for change that goes beyond the classroom. The creation of strong, vibrant school communities can result in positive academic and social outcomes for students who participate in spaces in which they are recognized and honored (Protacio & Edwards, 2015).

Multicultural classroom communities play a significant role in helping immigrant and refugee students develop language learning through sociocultural interactions (Nieto, 2009). Learning a language together fosters social integration by helping students engage in conversations with their peers; however, teachers should make a note to create safe spaces in which all children feel emotionally safe to take risks using a new language. Teachers can accomplish this goal by demonstrating an appreciation of all children's cultures and home languages and using abundant communication in instruction tasks (Cummins, 2001), for example, form small peer groups to talk about specific subjects and build students' self-confidence. Language can also be developed by giving refugee students small tasks that they can complete together in pairs; they must speak about the process (e.g., how can we build these blocks to look like those blocks?). Further, working collaboratively on learning tasks is essential in a multicultural class in which students of diverse backgrounds learn how to create dialogue, solve a problem, and value each other's cultures (Hattan & Lupo, 2020). This article provides an explanation of how multicultural transformative read-alouds differ from other forms of reading aloud (e.g., the interactive read-aloud). Moreover, it offers recommendations for how teachers can implement the transformative read-aloud into their existing curricula, depending on the developmental need of their students.

What Makes a Read-Aloud "Transformative," and How Does It Differ From Other Kinds of Read-Alouds?

The read-aloud is an instructional practice in which teachers read books aloud to children. It is predominantly an early childhood instructional strategy in which the teacher gathers a group of young children together for the reading of a book in order to help them learn aspects of beginning literacy, including print conventions, print tracking, the concept of a word, and beginning

reading strategies. Many times, the books are larger in size (big books), so that children can gather around the teacher, recreating the shared home reading experience. Typically, the teacher incorporates variations in pitch, tone, pace, and volume and asks questions about the book. According to Trelease (2001), reading books aloud is the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for successful reading.

Reading aloud in early childhood classrooms is a standard part of daily classroom instruction. However, often, it is not a literacy practice that emphasizes substantive discussions around the text or critical theory (García & Weiss, 2015). Yet, essential multicultural literacy practices include ways of interacting with powerful texts for the reader (Morrow, 2014). Moreover, sociocultural perspectives of literacy (e.g., Adams, 1990; Morrow, 2014; Vasquez, 2017) suggest that writing, reading, and language are not decontextualized skills, separate from specific contexts, contents, and social–communication purposes. Most current multicultural literacy views share Vygotsky's (1978) theory that all learning is socially and culturally transmitted and advocates for a multidimensional dialogue among the text, the content, and the reader. Creating literacy instruction from a critical perspective requires recognizing diverse personal and cultural viewpoints and allowing students to have meaningful dialogue, hence the transformative read-aloud.

In the transformative read-aloud, there is a shift in the dialogic discourse because teachers share the agency with the children (Lenox, 2013). Children and teacher, as well as one child and another, engage in reciprocal conversations. These conversations are generated as the teacher reads the book; at a certain point in the book, the teacher may prompt the class, or a child may raise her hand to offer a thought or a question. The teacher may give the class time to speak in dyads or time for some children to write or draw alone, giving them time to express themselves.

A transformative read-aloud includes the use of language that invites children to reflect on their own lives to create a multicultural classroom community in which they feel understood (Coelho, 2012). The kind of phrases included in this type of read-aloud include: let's stop and think, have you ever felt the way that this character has; did this book remind you of something that you have experienced? should we stop and take a minute to talk about it or write about it; and does anyone want to write or draw about it? Importantly, transformative read-alouds encourage immigrant and refugee students' cultural confidence when these read-alouds are crafted for their participation.

During any reading experience, printed words are essential. Rosenblatt (1985) maintains that comprehension results from the transaction between the reader and the written word. She posits that the reader's prior knowledge and

experiences contributing to making meaning from the text are at the heart of creating authentic literacy instruction. To apply transactional theory, teachers must show students how to use what they read and what they know to build meaning. Typically, when early childhood teachers plan a transformative read-aloud, they consider what prior knowledge readers might bring to the book. Teachers choose books that contain plots, characters, and themes that immigrant children find in their homes or communities and can relate to (Ward & Warren, 2020).

Suppose we are to move to a more culturally affirming reality? In that case, teachers need to develop a multicultural curriculum and literacy pedagogy for transformation, one that is characterized by an ongoing effort to create new space for dialogic speech, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to allow for discussion of multiple kinds of literature and perspectives (Hoffman, 2011). Reader response encourages students to become aware of what they bring to texts as readers; it has the potential to help them recognize the specificity of their cultural backgrounds and strive to understand the cultural backgrounds of others. However, multicultural transformative literacy experiences are capable of doing both simultaneously, promoting intercultural and intracultural understanding (Glazer & Seo, 2011). Bakhtin (1986) advised us that the only way to know ourselves honestly is through the "other"; wholeness emerges in and through that dialogue, creating and affirming the community in the classroom.

Children require multiple opportunities to talk about the text and vocabulary and, just as importantly, talk about their lives and how to resolve challenges in their lives. Reading in a multicultural classroom can be a haven, especially for children who are immigrants, and a way to better understand themselves and develop a positive identity. For example, here are a few talking points we suggest that teachers can stop and use during a transformative read-aloud and can adapt based on the developmental level of their students:

- What do you like best about your book?
- Does this book remind you of any experiences you've had in your neighborhoods or communities?
- What feelings did this book evoke for you?
- Which character do you most closely relate to, and why?
- How have you been changed by what you read?

Also, teachers may want to consider the following practices:

- Using different storytelling and creation tools to support the diversity of students;
- Allowing young children to listen to and read books, which might have a positive impact on young children's desire to retell or recreate existing stories or to create their own, and;

- Providing opportunities for children to construct stories, which will also support their narrative learning.

Building Teachers' Knowledge of How to Implement the Transformative Read-Aloud

Determining where the transformative read-aloud fits in the curriculum is an essential step for successful integration; however, becoming familiar with the transformative nature of the read aloud may require practice and refinement by teachers to ensure these practices fit within the classroom climate. According to Johnson et al. (2017), reading aloud in early childhood classrooms is a standard part of daily classroom instruction. Yet often this literacy practice may lack rich discussions around the text or critical theory. As a result, students may be unfamiliar with such conversations.

The use of multicultural literature, paired with dialogic instruction within a safe classroom community culture, provides students with both a window to other cultures and a mirror reflecting their own (Ward & Warren, 2020). Talk is central to the work of teaching and learning in U.S. classrooms (Glazier & Seo, 2011). Indeed, discourse is how we come to acquire and create knowledge of the world and our lives (Bakhtin, 1986). At times, teachers rely on the Initiate-Response-Evaluate (IRE) type of questioning; the teacher poses a question (Initiate), one student responds (R), and then the teacher evaluates (E) that one student's answer (Cazden, 2001). This type of questioning, however, is ineffective—not only has IRE been shown to inhibit language growth, it is especially harmful to developing the oral language of immigrant and dual language learners (Goldenberg, 2008). Instead, teachers can use guided conversations and questions to help students learn and connect with each other. Speaking to each other will not only assist them in their oral language, it will also help develop a class community. In guided discussions, the teacher or a student may initiate an idea or subject to speak about; depending on the developmental and linguistic needs of the class, the teacher can place children in small groups. The one caveat to guided discussions is that the book being discussed matters. Teachers can look for books that reflect the characters and background of the children in the classroom (Hoffman, 2011).

To aid development of second language acquisition in classroom communities, teachers can use peer groups; some groups can have speakers of the same second language, some may be a mix of language speakers. However, it is important to encourage students to keep using their home language to ensure their knowledge of it remains strong (Au, 2011). In English dominant schools, language mixing, when children interchange between the use of languages,

depending on their comfort level, is rarely modeled and is often implicitly or explicitly discouraged (Cummins, 2021). Monolingual teachers who might have had little to no training in working with multilingual children can use picture books that use multiple languages. They can also ensure that the classroom library includes books that represent the language of every child in the classroom. Teachers can also invite families to draw or write responses to dual language texts in family response journals (Rowe, 2018).

Other instructional considerations are also necessary—for example, transformative read-alouds call for increasing wait time after a question or prompt (Rowe, 1986). Trumbull et al. (2020) maintains that teachers should ask children to directly respond to their peers during the literacy session, which raises critical thought and student involvement. Allowing children to respond to their peers' ideas creates dialogues that are child-centered rather than teacher-directed; this encourages more authentic student expression during the entire school day. Allowing students to become more familiar with self-expression develops their language skills and provides them with practice in sharing their thoughts during transformative read-alouds. Also, by jotting down anecdotal notes of which students are speaking and engaging in conversation during center or free time, as well as noticing *what* students are talking about, teachers can become more aware of their funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) from home and what language skills need to be enhanced. Furthermore, establishing effective home–school partnerships in which participants jointly construct partnerships between the community and school contexts (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Shockley et al., 1995) can help provide parents with ways to learn and incorporate school-based practices, particularly in literacy, as well as to engage in the types of activities at home that promote children's literacy learning (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Helping teachers to learn with and from families so that they can integrate this knowledge into their classroom practices can also help meet the needs of immigrant students and their families (Goldin et al., 2018).

Additionally, teachers might model written responses on large chart paper and invite students to write or draw during preselected parts of the book. To ensure a safe space and community for immigrant and refugee children to express themselves during a literacy lesson, student responses can occur during or after reading. Once children are accustomed to the process, the teacher can encourage children to respond freely during the read-aloud. Modeling can be repeated for verbal responses during and after reading. As the gradual release of responsibility transfers from teacher to students (Crawford & Dorner, 2019; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), students are invited to write, draw, or speak, prompted by their independent needs. The paired and small-group collaboration provides motivation, which is crucial for immigrant and refugee students. Motivation

increases interest and learning of the material for children who, having faced diverse and sometimes difficult experiences, may be hesitant to participate, even in a welcoming setting such as a multicultural classroom (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2011).

Conclusion

Connecting with stories can help children develop a sense of community. According to Huck (1987), "Literature has the power to take us out of ourselves and return us to ourselves a changed self, to enlarge our thinking while educating our hearts" (p. 70). When teachers utilize transformative read-alouds, they provide robust and authentic literacy instruction, which develops all children's oral language, reading, and writing skills. Perhaps most importantly, teachers are creating a multicultural classroom culture that reflects understanding, acceptance, and a strong supportive classroom community. So, while the use of this approach might be particularly well-suited to help cultivate a climate of understanding and acceptance for children who may be marginalized due to differences in culture or language, this approach has the potential to support the language and literacy development of all children, as well as their social and emotional development.

Stories help us understand the social world in new ways. Miall (2006) labels this process of adopting new perspectives as "to dishabituate," which transcends gender, ethnicity, and reality, and affirm self-concepts. To gain social understanding from fiction, we must consider characters' internal experiences in addition to plot because, "just as in real life, the worlds of literary fiction are replete with complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration" (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 277). Teachers can begin to create these critical literacy practices starting with creating multicultural community classrooms, and by using inclusive literacy techniques such as the transformative classroom read-aloud (Vasquez, 2017).

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