The Language and Literacy Spectrum

Volume 34 | Issue 1 Article 5

May 2024

Centering Equity and Social Identity: Reflections on Culturally Sustaining Literacy Lessons from Two Elementary Classrooms

Nadine Bryce
Hunter College, City University of New York, nbryce@hunter.cuny.edu

Centering Equity and Social Identity: Reflections on Culturally Sustaining Literacy Lessons from Two Elementary Classrooms

Cover Page Footnote/Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Taylor Jackman and Dana Tarnapol for their contributions.

Toward an Active View of Reading

The "simple view of reading," that reading is the product of two distinct components, word recognition and language comprehension, has been updated. In this view, word recognition and comprehension are separate, and hierarchical. Decoding precedes comprehension. Comprehension depends on word recognition.

In the "active view of reading," where readers process words and meaning synergistically, reading is an interaction between the reader, text, task and sociocultural context (Duke & Cartwright, 2021, S32; Rosenblatt, 1993).

Bridged by print concepts, and knowledge of how to read fluently, readers figure out new vocabulary, chunk words by morphological units, and attend flexibly to letter-sound-meaning connections. They self-monitor for meaning while they read, write, reason, and explore how language works structurally. They construct cultural and other content knowledge as they learn reading-specific understandings (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

The active view of reading provides room for teachers to improve curriculum design and offer more affirming reading and literacy experiences (Muhammad & Mosley, 2021). But, the model focuses on readers, not tasks, texts, or sociocultural contexts. This was not an omission. Duke and Cartwright (2021) stated, "...our highlighting of the role of the reader's cultural and other content knowledge in our model identifies a mechanism by which the sociocultural context and reader's social identity, including racial, religious, socioeconomic, gender, and many other sociodemographic aspects of identity, impact the reading process (p. S38). Teachers who are aware of the need to center identity and equity in literacy can use an active view of reading to advance a pedagogy that centers children's social identities and their communities' sociocultural contexts to create more welcoming classroom environments.

Schools have not always been affirming places for children from marginalized communities. Researchers have cited the mismatch "...between school-valued discourses, expectations and routines that have largely been based on White, English-speaking, and middle-class norms and lifestyles, and the diverse ways of communicating, learning, being, and doing that many students in nondominant communities bring from their homes and communities" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 3). Teachers can reposition the linguistic, cultural, and literate resources children bring to school, to honor their heritages, languages, literacies, and social identities (Cantrell et al., 2022). With strategic focus on expanding our pedagogies, teachers can move past a critique of dominant, alienating practices that

perpetuate educational injustice to an asset-based pedagogy that extends children's learning and fosters a sense of hope and belonging in everyday classrooms.

Classroom Contexts

In the following examples, I invited two teachers affiliated with our graduate program in literacy to explore how children's social identities impacted their reading process. Taylor and Dana worked in urban elementary charter schools in New York City, at the time. Taylor had recently earned her master's degree in literacy and taught for several years as a literacy specialist in grades three, four and five. She returned to our program as an adjunct instructor. Dana has a master's degree in special education, and a master's degree in literacy. At the time, she was still enrolled in the program and was teaching fourth grade. Taylor and Dana are White, and most of their students are African American, and Latine. They agreed to share samples from their classrooms to illustrate how they used their knowledge of children's sociocultural contexts and social identities to impact their teaching of literacy.

Affirming Children's Identities through Dialogue with Parents

At the start of every year, Dana invites parents to reflect on their children's academic and social needs using a written survey (Figure 1). She asks them to share their understandings and concerns. Parents are asked how their children identify themselves, and who lives in their households. They share their preferred language of communication, special customs or traditions, and any information about technology available for communicating and learning. Parents identify their children's strengths, and what they think their children might need from her. By inviting parents and caregivers to become involved in the learning community through this survey, Dana capitalized on families' funds of knowledge, and the social nature of teaching and learning, rooted in families and communities (Moll et al., 1992). She demonstrated how fostering a community can be achieved through a humanizing approach to education, starting with parents' views of their children as individual people, with preferences and challenges. She laid the groundwork for starting a dialogue with parents and children about their growth as learners.

Figure 1. Sample Parent Survey

Parent Surveys

At the beginning of the year, each student went home with a parent survey to complete. The information provided helps me to get a better understanding of each child's home life, strengths and weaknesses and parental support. Survey were sent home in English and Spanish.

Welcome to Ms. Tamoyan's class! I am so excited to have your child in my class and work in partnership with you to ensure a successful year! I have included this survey to get to know your child and family better. If you can please complete this with as much information as possible, I would really appreciate it. If you have any questions, please feel free to e-mail me at ...

Student Name: Dana Student Pronouns: she/her

1. Who is in your family? Include any special names for parents/caregivers (ie Mom, Baba, etc.)

Mom, dad, sister

2. How many houses does your child call "home"? 2

3. If they have more than one home, what is your child's schedule? Who lives in each home?

Sometimes she stays with her aunt.

4. What language(s) are spoken in your child's home(s)?

English

5. What holidays does your family celebrate?

Christmas, Easter, birthdays

6. Is there anything you'd like to share about your family's culture such as religion, traditions, or anything that can help me know and celebrate your child and family's culture?

We go to church every Sunday.

7. Are you willing to share a piece of your culture with the class? yes

8. What technology do you have available at home?

We have a tablet and phone

9. What do you feel your child needs from me as a teacher?

Dana needs patience and clear routines

10. What are your child's strengths?

She is a great friend with a big heart

11. What are some areas you would like your child to work on this year?

Reading and math

12. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

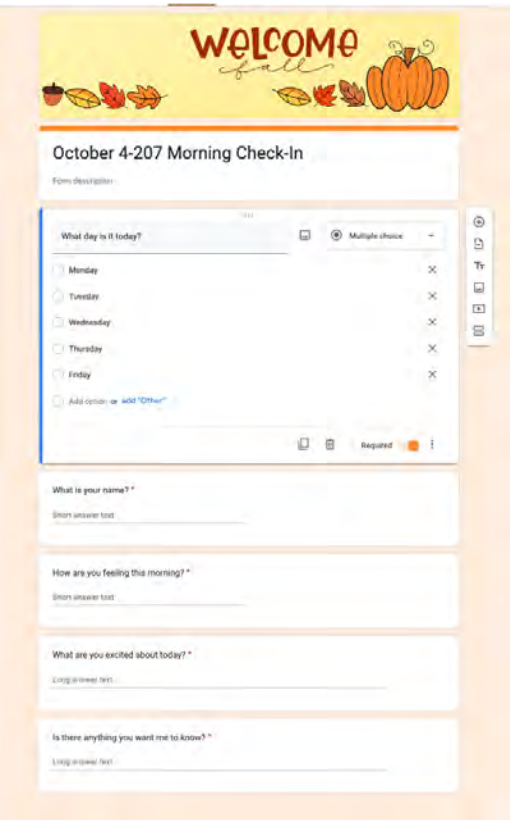
Please contact me whenever!

Note. This sample survey illustrates how Dana used her awareness of children's sociocultural contexts and social identities to create a welcoming classroom that builds on families' funds of knowledge.

Affirming Children's Identities with Daily Check-Ins

Almost every morning, Dana uses a Daily Check-In (Figure 2) form to collect information to support children's social and emotional awareness and health. This quick form invites children to self-assess, to name for themselves, how they are feeling, or any concerns they have for the day. This practice of using literacy to reflect on one's emotional health can promote self-awareness, wellness and joy (Muhammad, 2023). Dana found it liberating because teachers and children are often asked to segment their lives and concerns outside of school away from their daily activities in school. Here, they centered children's social and emotional awareness and wellness as a regular part of their day.

Figure 2. Sample Daily Check-In Form



Note. Each morning, children in Dana's class are provided with an opportunity to reflect on their feelings and concerns, to ensure they can connect their feelings to actions they can take to promote wellness and joy in school.

Establishing a Personal Mission Statement

To foster hope and transformation, teachers and students in Dana's school chose one word to describe their personal and interpersonal mission for the year. They learned about mission statements and a one-word-mission, where individuals choose one word to guide their attitudes, actions, and reflections. Children created visual representations of their mission statements, and posted them for all to see (Figure 3). As a class, they returned to these one-word mission statements periodically to take an active role in reminding themselves of how they are making the world a better place (Muhammad, 2023).

Figure 3. Sample Personal Mission Statements

Note. These samples illustrate one-word mission statements that Dana's students made. Each drawing features the focus word and is illustrated.

Affirming Children's Identities through Naming: Jerralena's Story

Taylor used *Alma and How She Got Her Name,* written and illustrated by Juana Martinez-Neal (2018) as a read aloud, and invited children to share stories about how they got their names. Children wrote about their names, revealing that their names can be a source of pride and joy, but also fear. Even though children told stories about how family members named them, they worried that others would not accept their names, or judge them for having a name that was too different. Jerralena (all children's names are pseudonyms) highlighted the pride she had in her name, but worried about other people laughing because they might think it was too long (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Jerralena's Story

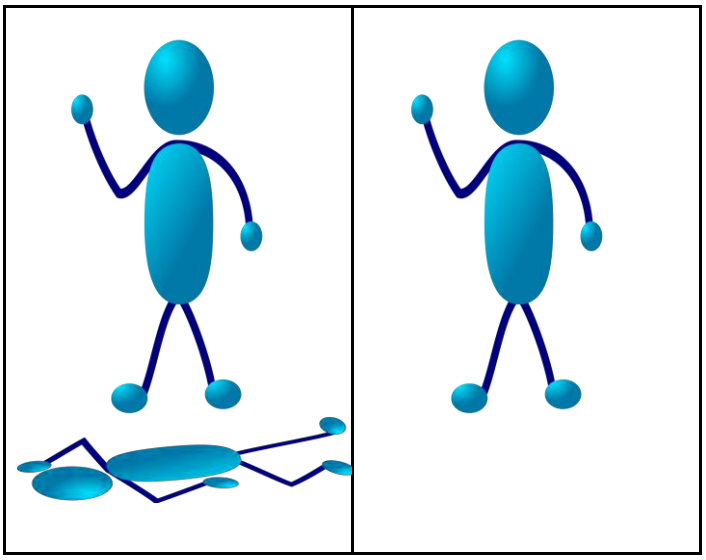
> My Name is So Long
>
> I no mi name looks shot but it is not shat. Ashle is long because is long and is Spanish. My uncl said I put Jerralena, Smile, Garza, Pena, and my mom said my hol name. She liked my name. I wot to love my name. Is Jerralena

Pena. I felt scard and I felt ppl was gunna laf at me so Evevde bully me. I went to Exceed and I love to exceed.

Note. Jerralena's story illustrates how Taylor provided opportunities for children to make sense of who they are and learn about others.

In the picture that accompanied her writing (Figure 5), Jerralena depicted herself being knocked down by the feeling that her name was too long. On the other side of her picture, she was standing and smiling. "I wot to love my name," she reflected. Even though she was scared of being bullied, she drew on the important family history as detailed in her story. Her uncle named her and her mother loved it. She wanted to love her name, too! Taylor's teaching provided an opportunity for Jerralena to be proud of her name and her family's history, while wrestling with the challenges of being considered different, because her name was so long, and she speaks Spanish at home.

Figure 5. Jerralena's Picture



Note. Jerralena illustrates how she faces the challenge of accepting her name. She feels overwhelmed and knocked down, but uses drawing to reimagine herself overcoming the challenge and being victorious in the end.

In a humanizing pedagogy, children are invited to use literacy to share new ideas and new discoveries, to name themselves and be themselves, while they

wrestle with the parts of reality they may find difficult. Literacy happens in communities. In the community where Jerralena found herself, she worried about being isolated and attacked. And, in the face of that difficult fear, she depicted herself standing, wanting to love her name (and herself).

Affirming Children's Identities through Read Alouds

In a related lesson, Taylor used *Your Name is a Song* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelo, illustrated by Luisa Uribe (2020). The interactive multimodal audiovisual recording of Rachel Linsmeier reading this book aloud (https://youtu.be/RETE1eKpUpw) invites listeners and readers to play with the sounds and syllables of names, creating songs that are unique and playful. The main character wins over her reluctant teacher who struggled to say her name. She sang the teacher's name, "MiZZZ ANNN-der-sonnn" and declared it a pretty song. Other children asked for songs for their names, and soon, the whole class sang the main character's name, Cora-Jalimuso. Thompkins-Bigelo helped Taylor's students appreciate names aesthetically, because written pronunciations are provided. The author builds joy into the act of learning to speak new names out loud because they are sounds that you can play with, like songs (Muhammad, 2023).

Writing about Names to Explore Identity

In a culturally sustaining approach to writing, Taylor asked children to share more about themselves, where their names come from, what makes their names special, and what they love about their names (Cantrell et al., 2022). Using multiple sentence starters for children who needed scaffolding and support, including emergent writers or English learners, she learned what children valued about their names (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Writing about Names

- I love my name because: it's from the Bible.
- I love my name because: it sounds like "just ice."
- My name comes from: my ancestors.
- My name was inspired off of my mom's favorite singer, so I think it means singer.
- My name is important to me because it's real pretty.
- I think my parents named me that because it matches my Chinese name.

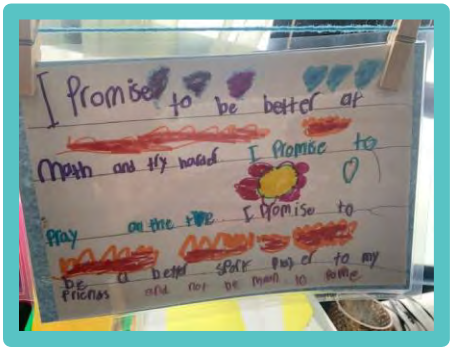
Note. Children wrote about their names to explore their identities. By providing sentence starters to students who needed it, Taylor scaffolded writing, and provided writers with appropriate support so they meet the goals of the assignment.

Explicitly addressing identity invites children to read and write themselves into the curriculum. It generates interest, builds meaningful connections between home and school, and fosters a respect for our common humanity. When the curriculum has room for everyone, we move toward equity and fairness, but only when we see ourselves and others as equally human.

Writing to Take Action

After reading *I Promise* written by basketball legend LeBron James, illustrated by Nina Mata (2020), Taylor asked children to write "I promise" statements, in which they declared their goals and intentions, and renewed their promises each day by reading them aloud to classmates (Figure 7). They built social practices using literacy to develop communities of reflection and care.

Figure 7. I Promise Statements



Note. Children wrote "I promise" statements to show their commitment to setting and meeting their goals.

Discussion

How did teachers use their knowledge of children's sociocultural contexts and social identities to inform literacy curriculum and instruction?

Dana and Taylor made efforts so children could see themselves and learn about others in the curriculum (Bishop, 1990), but they also invited children to name for themselves, who they were, what they cared about, and who they hoped to become. In Dana's classroom, children's one-word-mission statements provided a pathway toward their greater aspirations. In Taylor's classroom, "I promise" statements created the vision and mission.

In Thompkins-Bigelo's humanizing story about a child's challenge to get a teacher to say her name, the main character wanted to be welcomed, appreciated and accepted. But her teacher and classmates appeared to erect barriers that alienated and marginalized her. Cora-Jalimuso found a way to connect with everyone, with her infectious smile, and her beautiful songs. She used her mother's advice to sing everyone's name as a way of remembering how to say it. She transformed her classroom into a welcoming place. Like Cora-Jalimuso, Taylor's student, Jerralena, wanted to find a way to be accepted, without fear of judgment or the threat of bullying and violence. Through Taylor's teaching, Jerralena found a place to reclaim her humanity, to smile when saying her name, to free herself from anxiety and worry. She centered her own self-appreciation and desire to love her name, sustaining her identity culturally and linguistically (Cantrell et al., 2022).

Both teachers anchored their teaching in the recognition of the need for community. Both teachers highlighted the role literacy plays in sustaining one's connection to community. For example, in Dana's classroom, motivated by their own desire to understand what it meant for professional athletes to "take a knee" during the national anthem, children used their literacies to learn more about the contentious issue from multiple perspectives. They freely explored what seemed to be dividing so many Americans politically. Children wanted to understand how to live together as a community when racism and police violence were threats.

Dana read aloud *The Hero in the Helmet: Colin Kaepernick* written by Joa Macnalie, illustrated by Adua Hernandez (2018). They discussed patriotism, the meaning behind the American flag, and police killings and violence against unarmed Black American men, women, and children. They examined the issues from the perspectives of those who believe the actions of "taking a knee" were disrespectful to American traditions, like standing and saluting the flag, as compared to those who used the public platform to protest police violence against unarmed Black people. Through an outlining of the debate, and an analysis of the issues, children rejected the dehumanization of the protesters. They compared the movement to protect Black lives to movements for justice and equality in American history, and around the world (Bryce, 2019). They read *Say Something!* written and illustrated by Peter Reynolds (2019), using literacy to affirm the power of even the

smallest voice, to stand up for what is right, and to make the world a better place. Children were invited to write to the school principal to identify an issue they wanted to change, like improving the school lunch menu.

Through literacy, children challenged the distorted view of life in school as separate from life in the real world. That distortion can lead to alienation and cynicism, that teachers and children cannot free themselves or others from unjust social orders that engender violence and oppression. Even Jerralena's fear and imagined violence were mediated by literacy. She thought she would be harmed when her classmates found out about her very long Spanish name, but she drew herself as victorious over the challenge.

By centering our humanity, welcoming children's identities and inviting them to examine inequities in school, and in the world, teachers can prepare children to be agents of social change, who see themselves as powerful and worthy enough to imagine schools as places that can nurture and honor their full humanity (Ehrenworth et al., 2021). Far too many youths feel disenfranchised in schools. Images and texts do not reflect them or their communities, rendering them invisible from the social imagination of worlds they read about and see. Or, worse, the images and texts they do see of themselves are pathologizing and criminalizing. Young people need a pedagogy of hope and care, where each child can feel welcomed, seen, and heard, where each teacher nurtures all children's full humanity through an integrated, purposeful and responsive approach to literacy. Classrooms can transform into spaces and places where children feel whole and affirmed, where they come to learn and live dignified young lives, dreaming of a better world and taking part in making it happen (Ahmed, 2018; Ehrenworth, Wolfe, & Todd, 2021; Love, 2023; Muhammad, 2023).

References

Ahmed, S. K. (2018). *Being the change: Lessons and strategies to teach social comprehension.* Heinemann.

Bryce, N. (2019). Social movements for freedom: An anti-oppressive approach to literacy and content area learning in an urban fourth grade classroom. *Radical Teacher: A Socialist, Feminist, and Anti-Racist Journal on the Theory and Practice of Teaching, 114,* pp. 60 – 71.

Cantrell, C., Walker-Dalhouse, & Lazar, A. M. (Eds.) (2022). *Culturally sustaining literacy pedagogies: Honoring students' heritages, literacies, and languages.* Teachers College Press.

Duke, N., & Cartwright, K. B. (2021). The science of reading progresses: Communicating advances beyond the simple view of reading. *Reading Research Quarterly, 56*(S1), S25 - S44. doi:10.1002/rrq.411

Duke, N., Ward, A., & Pearson, P. D. (2021). The science of reading comprehension instruction. *The Reading Teacher, 74*(6), 663 - 672. doi:10.1002/trtr.1993

Ehrenworth, M., Wolfe, P. & Todd, M. (2021). *The civically engaged classroom: Reading, writing, and speaking for change.* Heinemann.

Kinloch, V. (2017). "You ain't making me write": Culturally sustaining pedagogies and Black youths' performances of resistance. In D. Paris and H. Samy Alim (Eds). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (pp. 1 - 21). Teachers College Press.

Love, B. (2023). *Punished for dreaming: How school reform harms Black children and how we heal.* St. Martin's Press.

Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice, 31*(2), 132 - 141. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849209543534)

Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy.* Scholastic.

Muhammad, G. E., & Mosley, L. T. (2021). Why we need identity and equity learning in literacy practices: Moving research, practice, and policy forward. *Language Arts, 98(4),* 189 - 196. https://doi.org/10.58680/la202131154

Muhammad, G. E. (2023). *Unearthing Joy: A guide to culturally and historically responsive teaching and learning.* Scholastic.

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world.* Teachers College Press.

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1993). The transactional theory: Against dualisms. *College English, 55*(4), 377 - 386. https://doi.org/10.2307/378648