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## Using Multicultural Children's Literature to Address Social Issues: The Power of Interactive Read Aloud

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### *Abstract*

*As the demographics of U.S. schools are changing, educators have to embrace this change and prepare students to adopt diversity and inclusivity as a means to increase students' understanding of their peers. Not only are race and ethnicity identities at the forefront of these changes, gender identity and ability identity must also be supported, as more students are challenging traditional gender roles and as more students are mainstreamed into regular education classes. This article seeks to address usage of interactive read alouds of multicultural literature as a means to help bridge students who need inclusive and equitable pedagogical practices in race, gender, and ability identity and those who need to understand those who identify as one or more of the aforementioned. A recommended list of multicultural literature is included with discussion starters to assist educators in establishing critical conversations with students who identify as one of the listed identities or for those students who need to understand those students who identify differently than them.*

*Keywords: multicultural children's literature, racial identity, gender identity, ability identity, read alouds*

### **Background of the Problem**

In the early 2000's, the United States entered an era characterized by the influx of immigrants and a vast increase in the number of U.S. born ethnic minorities (Banks, 2001, NCES, 2014). That era continues; for example, from fall 2011 the number of White students enrolled in prekindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the U.S. public schools decreased. The number of Latino students enrolled during this same time period, however, increased (NCES, 2014). Most recently, there has been an increase of students of color in public school classrooms. In fact, the United States Department of Commerce (2000) projected that African American, Asian American, and Latino students will comprise nearly 57% of all students across the nation by the year 2050. Thus, there is a critical need for future educators to embrace the reality that they will be working with students whose backgrounds will, more often than not, be unlike their own; teacher educators need to be prepared and know how to prepare their students to embrace this reality, as well (Clayton, 2011; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Wilson & Rodkin, 2011). Within the ever-changing context of the sociopoliti-

cal climate, it is important that teacher educators provide students with opportunities to explore a variety of multicultural children's literature to help build students' level of comfort and understanding of the social issues expressed in discussion with students in classrooms.

Multiple factors influence identity development including race, ethnicity, social class, language, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ability (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Gee (2000) suggests that identity includes "being recognized as a certain kind of person in a given context" (p. 99). Because multiple factors influence one's identity development, it is imperative that teachers are aware of the complex nature of the identity development process. Emdin (2016) suggests that when instructing students, teachers are more successful when they recognize the students' realities. This article seeks to identify best practices when using multicultural read alouds and the possible effects they have on identity development. Additionally, this work seeks to make recommendations for teachers who can incorporate multicultural children's literature through teacher-led, interactive read alouds. Multicultural children's literature that incorporates racial identity, gender identity, and ability identity will also be explored.

### **Purpose of Interactive Read Aloud**

Reading aloud to students is a practice that is consistently recommended for elementary teachers in order to encourage students' engagement with and motivation to read text (Dugan, 1997; Sipe, 2000, 2002). Researchers have examined how teachers use "read-alouds" in the classroom (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004) and the teacher practices used to analyze how students respond to the books that are read aloud (to them by teachers and/or peers and/or that they read aloud themselves) (Sipe, 2000, 2002).

Little attention has focused on how book subject matter may influence teacher reading and student reading response. Furthermore, research shows that in the educational space limited opportunity exists for students to have open-ended conversation around literature (Worthy, Chamberlain, Peterson, Sharp, & Shih, 2012).

In a recent study which explored teachers' comfort level with discussions of a variety of social topics with children, it was found that the topics of marriage equality and gender identity elicited the most discomfort. Teachers identified these two topics as areas they would not discuss with students in their classroom (Piper, Walker, Pittman, 2017). Religion, family composition, incarceration and politics were also areas of concern for teachers as they identified these areas as topics that they would discuss but would experience discomfort when doing so. The topics that teachers felt they could openly discuss included disabilities, poverty, and aging. Teachers may feel challenged by the sociopolitical contexts of some read aloud experiences. Teachers need to be confident and comfortable to discuss social issues and hot topics with their students with a sense of fearlessness. Confidence and comfort is vital to their ability to discuss social issues and hot topics with their students. Both educators of pre-service teachers, and those who work with teachers, can be better prepared to support teachers in these new frames of discussion.

### **Multicultural Children's Literature**

The umbrella of multicultural children's literature includes multiple categories (e.g., religion, social groups, gender, families, race, etc.). The variety of topics and texts provides children with opportunity to expand

their knowledge and understandings about various topics. When teachers select and implement carefully considered authentic literature they can avoid promoting stereotypes for groups of people or of cultures. In applying Freire's (1970) framework of critical literacy to the teaching of children, the goal is, again, to teach reading and writing while also teaching self-efficacy and agency. Freire (1970) describes critical literacy as a process of coming to consciousness about issues of power, privilege, and oppression in the world, and then using that consciousness to push back against societal injustices. Children learn to read and write, while also learning to resist the coercive effects of uncritical literacy amongst other things (e.g., standardized instruction, especially of language) (Comber, Thompson, & Wells, 2001; Janks, 2000; Luke, 2000). Thus, teachers who teach using multicultural children's literature through a critical literacy framework should do so through a "problem posing" approach to consider issues of culturally relevant concerns for students as problems in search of solutions, rather than simply static conditions of existence from which there is no relief (Freire, 1970, 1990). When the approach and framework are student centered, opportunities for critical conversations to arise around social issues that children often question when otherwise those conversations are left untouched due to teachers' comfort levels. Children who have the opportunity to discuss literature through interactive read aloud, develop comprehension strategies and their own self-perceptions and identities as readers (Wiseman, 2012). As teachers consider the complexity of interactive read-aloud and critical conversations, it is crucial to familiarize them with a variety of texts that they can use to increase comfort levels with these societal topics and provide students with engaging dialogue.

This work seeks to explore multicultural children's literature across three areas; racial identity, gender identity, and ability identity. Included are books that address each area and detailed sample questions that teachers can use to prompt student discussion during read alouds in the elementary-aged classroom.

**Racial Identity.** Media outlets can impact the ways that society and particularly children see race today. Topics such as immigration, police brutality, poverty, and race are often at the forefront of social discussions. In response, the selection of children's literature around similar topics is increasing. The following texts can be used to introduce the topic of race to children, *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001), *Pink and Say* (Polacco, 1994), *Tea and Milk* (Say, 2009), and *Separate is Never Equal* (Tonatiuh, 2014). While reading, texts like these provide opportunities for the reader to make meaning of the story and situate the social contexts. Table 1 provides publication details and a brief summary of these recommended texts.

**Gender Identity.** Gender identity is a topic that is relevant in schools today. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth are declaring their identity at younger ages, and the average coming out age is sixteen (Herdt & Boxer, 1996, as cited in Human Rights Watch, 2001). Because of varying definitions around gender identity and sexual identity, the exact number of school-aged children who identify as GLBT in the United States may be difficult to determine. Because schools are designated safe spaces for children, teachers can support students' true identity with texts that explore discussions about

gender identity. Texts that are appropriate for forming critical conversations centered around gender identity are represented in Table 2.

**Ability Identity.** As classrooms continue to grow, teachers are charged with meeting the varying needs of individual students. Often the social development determines how a child will participate in school and in society. Inclusion of all children is essential to the development of each individual child. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) was created to ensure that all students have an equitable education. Today schools include children who have a physical or educational disability, and many of these students are mainstreamed into the general education classrooms with the support of special education teachers and assistants. Teaching children the importance of acceptance is an important part of their own identity development. There are many texts available that explore students' ability identity. Some suggested texts are outlined in Table 3 provide insight about various ability identity topics ranging from visual impairment to autism.

### **Discussion of Implementation of Multicultural Children's Literature**

While a majority of educators agree that frequent teacher read alouds are important (Anderson, Hieber, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), they have difficulty implementing them when they are tasked with a standards-based approach to teaching especially when school districts promote a pre-packaged scripted curriculum with limited flexibility to add multicultural children's texts. Additionally, studies on teacher read alouds (Bintz, 1993; Elley, 1992; Ouellette, Dagostino, & Carifio, 1999) have been conducted but the lack of

discussion around the process that effective teachers use to implement read alouds to enhance student learning on multicultural topics is lacking. What is evident is that research suggests there are limited opportunities for students to have open-ended conversations around literature in PK-12 classrooms (Worthy, Chamberlain, Peterson, Sharp, & Shih, 2012). Bohm (1996) argues that in order to create such spaces, teachers need to assume more of a facilitator role in the classroom, and even act as a participant in the discussion of texts. This is a vital teacher role when the topics around identity development are addressed.

A key element to interactive read alouds is the opportunity that teachers have to introduce students to literature they may not have had the opportunity to view otherwise (Hedrick & Pearish, 2003; Morrow, 2003). Research demonstrates the benefits of read aloud activities especially in terms of motivating students to read and in develop their reading prowess (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004; Morrow, 2003; Palmer, Codling, & Gambrell, 1994). Overall, the research emphasizes the importance of selecting texts that increase student engagement with, and the understanding of, literary features such as character identification, story setting, and text connections. These outcomes are most durably achieved when students undertake learning through analytically challenging conversation about literature (Dungan, 1997; Sipe 2000; 2002). Multicultural texts related to developing identities help students gain connection to literature whereby children are able to understand their own developing social identities while increasing their literacy knowledge.



### Conclusion

Classrooms across the United States are changing. Children are becoming more aware of different issues facing society that, in fact, have the potential to influence their identity development. Now, more than ever, it is essential that teachers consider how their approach to discussing these topics may influence a child's social development and their understanding of identity. The literature provided is authentic and can be used by teacher candidates, teachers, and teacher educators to begin to have the critical conversations that impact students and teachers alike. Implementing such literature has the power to increase awareness of issues and impact societal change.

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Table 1  
*Racial Identity Themed Texts*

Text Title	Author, Year	Summary	Discussion Prompts
<i>The Other Side</i>	Jacqueline Woodson, 2001	A familiar story of a friendship between Clover and Annie, two girls who live on opposite sides of a fence. Clover, a young African-American female and Annie, a young white female see each other often but have been told to not go to the other side. As summer passes, the two girls introduce themselves and the unfamiliar becomes familiar. This story shows the power of young children.	Have your parents ever told you not to go somewhere? Explain.  Have your parents ever told you that you could not be friends with someone? Explain.  How did you meet your friends?
<i>Pink and Say</i>	Patricia Polacco, 1994	This is a story of interracial friendship during the Civil War between two 15-year old soldiers. Say, a young White and poor soldier tells the story of how he was rescued by Pinkus as he was wounded. The boys eventually are torn apart again.	Have you ever been friends with someone from a different race?  Other than your family, have you ever helped someone when they were hurt? Why did you choose to help?
<i>Tea and Milk</i>	Allen Say, 2009	Recounting the story of May, who after graduating from High School in California is forced to move with her parents to their native Japan. May becomes rebellious and misses her native country. Her parents make her repeat high school to learn “her own language” and the students begin to tease her. May overcomes these challenges and focuses on exploring just who she is.	Have you ever been teased for talking <i>differently</i> ? Explain.  How would you feel if you had to repeat a grade to learn a language?
<i>Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez &amp; Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation</i>	Duncan Tonatiuh, 2014	In 1944, third grader Sylvia Mendez tried to enter school in California. However, her family was repeatedly told, “Your children have to go to the Mexican School.” Unhappy with the comments from the school, Mendez’s parents formed an association and fought against the injustice.	What does injustice mean?  Should all students be allowed to go to the same school? Explain.  Have you ever stood up for something in which you believed? Explain.
<i>The Name Jar</i>	Yangsook Choi,	A young Korean girl, Unhei, moved to an American school. In her new school, she felt that she needed to change her name to fit the identity of U.S. students. Unhei’s classmates put names in a jar for her to try. Unhei tried many American names. Unhei didn’t realize how special her name was until a classmate visited her neighborhood. Unhei decided to keep her name as an important cultural identity.	How did you receive your name?  What does your name mean?  Would you change your name if you had to move to a new country? Why or Why not? Explain.

Table 2  
*Gender Identity Themed Texts*

Text Title	Author, Year	Summary	Discussion Prompts
<i>I Am Jazz</i>	Jessica Herthel, 2014	From a young age, Jazz knew she had a girl’s brain inside a boy’s body. Confused, her family took Jazz to the doctor, and the doctor confirmed that Jazz was transgender and born that way. Having a supportive family, friends, and the chance to be your true self is evident throughout the story.	In what ways do your family and friends support you?  What does it mean to be your true self? Explain.
<i>10,000 Dresses</i>	Marcus Ewert, 2008	Bailey has dreams every night about beautifully made dresses. Unfortunately, nobody wants to hear about these amazing dreams. Instead, Bailey’s parents suggest that Bailey should not be thinking or dreaming about dresses because, “You’re a boy!”. Bailey meets someone who understands Bailey and helps make her dreams come true.	Should Bailey be allowed to dream about dresses? Why or why not?  Have you ever been told that you cannot do something because of your gender? Explain.
<i>Who Are You?: The Kid’s Guide to Gender Identity</i>	Pessin-Whedbee, 2016	This non-fiction text provides a discussion of all genders through this book. The topic of gender identity is explored through the individual interests, preferred clothing, and preferred gender. Additionally, this text celebrates all people for exactly who they are.	Why do you think society chose girls to play with dolls and boys to play with trucks? Do you think it is appropriate if the opposite occurs? Why or why not?

Table 3  
*Ability Identity Themed Texts*

Text Title	Author, Year	Summary	Discussion Prompts
<i>My Brother Charlie</i>	Holly Robinson Peete, 2010	Callie and Charlie are twins. Charlie has autism. This story addresses the disorder and focuses on the themes of love, patience, and acceptance from the perspective of Callie.	<p>What are ways that we can celebrate everyone's strengths regardless of their ability?</p> <p>What ways can you show appreciation for- and acceptance of someone who has autism? Explain.</p>
<i>Keep Your Ear on the Ball</i>	Genevieve Petrillo, 2009	Based on a true story, this text explores a young boy, Davey, who is blind. He loves to play with his classmates but when it was time to play kickball, he was faced with multiple difficulties. His classmates help him so that he can be included in the game.	<p>Have you ever helped someone who could not see? Explain.</p> <p>In what ways have you included someone in a game, activity, or friendship who has a different ability?</p>
<i>Just Because</i>	Rebecca Elliott, 2014	A young brother describes everything he loves about his big sister, Clemmie. It isn't until later in the story that it is introduced that Clemmie has special needs. The story encourages sibling friendship.	<p>Do you consider your siblings as your friends? Explain.</p> <p>If you had a sibling with special needs would you treat him or her differently? Explain.</p>

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