

Picturebooks and Critical Inquiry: Tools to (Re)Imagine a More Inclusive World

by Amanda Deliman

Literature can be used to create communities of conscience around topics of social justice, hope, and activism. Furthermore, when the lens of critical literacy is applied to interactive discussions about books, the messages shared in the texts are not neutral and can be viewed from multiple viewpoints, thereby providing rich openings for readers to think more critically about the world. This qualitative case study investigates how second graders discuss a variety of social issues using diverse children's picturebooks. International children's literature can initiate important conversations to help break down perpetuating cycles of social inequality, restore hope, and bring kindness to the world.

Energizing the importance of social responsibility, building critical communities of care and compassion, and advancing self-reflection and critical thinking in our youngest learners can have positive and lasting effects in our school communities and beyond. Utilizing picturebooks as tools for reimagining a more inclusive world can often be the opening needed for children to become inquirers of their own learning and curious investigators advocating for change.

Creating opportunities for young children to develop a richer global competency while attending to personal introspection takes time and deliberate planning. When young readers advocate for the importance of maintaining one's own identity while assimilating into a new culture, as in Karen Williams and Khadra Mohammed's *My Name Is Songoel* (2009), they begin to understand the importance of interrogating multiple viewpoints (Lewison et al. 383). When faced with the questions of becoming environmentally conscious, Miranda Paul's *One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia* (2015) guides readers to investigate

topics of personal agency and activism. Examples of bullying, as shown in Jacqueline Woodson's *Each Kindness* (2012), can position readers to consider how to break down barriers that perpetuate this reality in schools, which also permeates society as a whole.

Advancing global perspectives and providing openings for young people to cultivate empathy through collaborative engagements while using literature can serve as a powerful tool for harnessing positive social action. This article showcases discussions and children's responses to picturebook read-alouds that investigate a variety of social issues. Additionally, picturebook sets are offered as suggestions to further examine themes that include, among others, activism and social responsibility, building critical communities of care and compassion, and advancing self-reflection and critical thinking.

Care and Inquiry

Multiple forms of critical perspectives and pedagogies erupted in the latter part of the twentieth century as a way to humanize educational experiences while considering the needs of the whole learner (Freire 38; Janks, "Critical Literacy" 226; Noddings, *Caring* 103; Street 111). These theoretical underpinnings inform instructional practices while giving credence to the use of picturebooks as a way to cultivate empathy in young readers.

Nel Noddings suggested not only that relationships and compassion become fundamental aspects of education, but that these characteristics should be an integral part of our educational goals (*Education* 171). As a researcher and facilitator, I drew on perspectives of Noddings's approach that caring for the self and being cared for can provide openings for the participants to rise to the truest form of self. Building relations of care and trust in the classroom is necessary

for participants to feel comfortable to take risks, challenge personal assumptions, and negotiate diverse perspectives.

Paulo Freire urged that people should have the skills necessary to create critical dialogue to avoid the “culture of silence” (12), the inequitable social structures where the oppressed are further marginalized. When time is provided for children to examine critical issues, they can consider what actions are needed to disrupt unequal power relations.

Moreover, rather than focusing strictly on standardization that comes with accountability measures, Maxine Greene asserted that we should “cherish the integrity” of children’s meaning making while learning alongside them “to interpret and to cope with the mystified and endangered world” (48). Utilizing these humanizing and critical pedagogies can help our young people become more critically informed about the world.

Another, more prominent model of critical pedagogy that informs the instructional practices in my research is the four dimensions of critical literacy created by Mitzi Lewison, Amy Seely Flint, and Katie Van Sluys (382). This research team synthesized and condensed thirty years of professional literature to produce the following four dimensions of critical literacy: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action and promoting social justice. When interpreting texts using these interrelated dimensions, the role of the teacher is important. Instead of searching for one correct answer, the learning environment becomes a place of inquiry where all participants can contend with understanding multiple viewpoints and differing perspectives.

In many of bell hooks’s writings, a central theme emerges that highlights the power of critical thinking. She states that “children are organically predisposed as critical thinkers,” and a classroom can become a place of “fierce engagement and intense learning” if the children are

shown by example that “learning in action means that not all of us can be right all the time, and that the shape of knowledge is constantly changing” (10). Picturebooks become tools for advancing critical thinking.

Communities of Care

The need to create communities of conscience around topics of social justice, hope, and activism is paramount in a time when social media and news outlets expose viewers and readers to misleading information. Innovative literacy practices that provide an opening for young children to build community and compassion while learning how to challenge misaligned messages and “fake news” could have positive and lasting outcomes for our local communities and beyond (Farmer 2). Social justice picturebooks that examine topics such as anti-racism, climate justice, the refugee crisis, and gender discrimination, among others, can be tools to initiate important and challenging discussions with young people. Generative conversations stemming from picturebooks not only have the potential to increase comprehension abilities, but thoughtful discussions can challenge stereotypes and call into question issues of power and privilege (Leland et al. 147). These practices can simultaneously help create a learning environment where the opinions and ideas of everyone are valued.

Guided by the research question *How do children specifically respond to picturebooks about social issues through discussions, drama, and writing activities?*, this multiyear qualitative study, conducted in one second-grade classroom, investigated how children responded to interactive read-alouds using diverse children’s literature. The language and social processes that children used to interrogate issues about diversity and equity through drama and literature (Medina and Campano 333) were critically examined using dimensions of critical literacy

frameworks (Janks, “Domination” 176; Lewison et al. 382) and thematic analysis (Nowell et al. 2).

The participants included one classroom teacher (self-identified as a white female) and a primarily racially homogenous population of about thirty-five mixed-gender second graders in one Midwestern town located in the United States. Out of the children represented in the second year of the study (showcased in this article), twelve were female (one multiracial and eleven white) and eight were male (one Asian American and seven white). In the school hosting the study, 43 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. As a white female and first-generation college student conducting a study in a classroom quite similar to one that I attended, I continuously questioned power, privilege, my own understandings of social constructs, and how my identity was influencing the study design.

Over the course of one school year, my weekly visits in the classroom demonstrated how the chosen picturebooks could serve as openings for the children to challenge assumptions, take on new roles, and imagine ways to foster inclusivity while they broadened their own perspectives and made sense of the messages shared in the texts. Based on the findings, this article describes several instructional practices and offers suggestions for text sets that can initiate conversations about building critical communities of care and taking steps toward developing courageous acts of positive social action. The research question generated three themes that will be posed as questions to organize the insights shared here.

Creating Communities of Care

How can social justice literature be used to create communities of conscience where readers’ ideas and opinions are valued?

During one of my weekly visits to the second-grade classroom, we read and discussed the picturebook *My Name Is Songoel* and participated in dramatic inquiry. The story is about a child refugee who lost his father in war and was forced to leave his homeland of Sudan. Songoel moved to the United States with his mother and little sister, where everything seemed new and strange. The protagonist felt homesick and lonely until he came up with a clever solution that opened the door to building new connections with his peers.

The purpose for choosing this story was twofold. First, we wanted the students to consider multiple perspectives, and more specifically, to think about how people may view the wants and needs of a child refugee dissimilarly. In the story, Songoel moves to the United States and feels out place because everything is different: the clothes, the people, the transportation, the language. While reading and discussing the picturebook, the students quickly noticed the importance of Songoel embracing his identity and the emotions that come with feeling a sense of belonging. In one scene, Songoel chooses to sleep on the floor instead of on the mattress with sheets. As we were reading and discussing that part of the story, the students quickly made an inference that the floor was more like what he was used to. This picturebook read-aloud initiated conversations about caring for others based on their unique individual needs.

To extend on the conversations about creating communities of conscience, the children participated in role-play. Hotseating is a dramatic engagement where a person (playing in role) sits in the “hotseat” and is asked questions by others, who can be in or out of role.

Ella (all names are pseudonyms) happily obliged when asked to sit in the hotseat. While she was walking to the center of the circle, I encouraged her peers to ask “Songoel” (Ella) some questions. The following excerpt includes a portion of the dramatic engagement.

Rick: “Um, did it seem different when you moved to America?”

Ella: “Yeah.”

Me: “How did it seem different?”

Ella: “Um, everything looked different from the refugee camp.”

Me: “Can you tell us some of the differences you noticed?”

Ella: “There were big buildings and I don’t know what to call them...cars?”

Me: “What are some things that would have helped you when moving to America?”

Ella: “I wish it would have looked a little less different.”

Rachel: “What was it like in the refugee camp?”

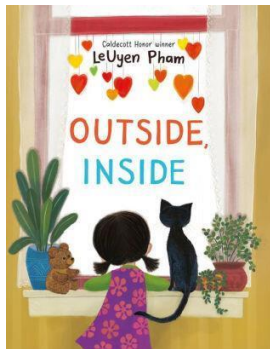
Ella: “It was very small, but we only had a few things.”

Upon reflection of this small excerpt, I noticed several things. First, the students were paying attention to larger social and cultural systems. Ella was pointing out differences she considered between the United States and the refugee camp and how changes in the new environment made her feel. Through trying to imagine herself in Songoel’s shoes, Ella was demonstrating highly critical social acts of reading the scenario and adding her own personally meaningful interpretations. She was negotiating Songoel’s view of the world through the dramatic exchange with her peers. The students were also fostering notions of empathy by thinking about Songoel’s (Ella’s) needs, which can be inferred upon close examination of the types of questions that they were asking. The students, while in and out of role, can be seen negotiating diverse perspectives in terms of larger sociopolitical systems. Furthermore, the invitation to participate in the dramatic engagement provided an opening for Ella to take ownership in her own inquiry-based learning. The conversations that emerged using this picturebook read-aloud provided openings for the children to build compassion and love for the protagonist while simultaneously honoring the ideas of one another.

The following selection of texts can be used to further expand on the notion of creating communities of conscience where inclusive practices can be discussed, multiple ideas can be appreciated, and opposing viewpoints can be valued.



The Big Umbrella (2018; Bates) is a book about fostering inclusivity and welcoming others. The story can promote rich conversation as the readers dance between the words and images in this metaphorical tale that embraces hospitality and welcomes diversity.



Outside, Inside (2021; LeUyen) caters to the younger audience through teaching about adversities and successes faced during the COVID-19 global pandemic. As lives were challenged and grief and worry permeated daily life, resilience and compassion were fostered through endless generosity from essential workers and family members striving to persevere during unprecedented times.



One of a Kind, Like Me / Único Como Yo (2016; Mayeno) removes social constructs of gender identity by sharing one child's journey of individual expression as told from his own perspective. This story of unconditional love provides rich openings for young children to discuss what it takes to create a community of care where all people are valued for their uniqueness.

Exhibiting Social Responsibility

What literature can be used to cultivate empathy and encourage personal agency that can lead to positive social action?

During another weekly visit to the second-grade classroom, I started the session reviewing the terms *agency* and *agents for change*. These were terms previously discussed in the study and I wanted to determine how the students were recalling information from our past sessions together. I asked the students what the terms mean.

Colton said *agents for change* means “to help people be included.”

Brittney said an agent for change “is a person who changes the world.”

Quinn stated: “To make it awesome.”

Rachel yelled: “To make it beautiful.”

This powerful narrative reaffirms the students’ own constructions of agency (Mathis 619) in terms of taking a global activist stance. I see a bridge linking larger global contexts to the smaller classroom context. The critical and reflective responses from the students show that they were thinking of agency as a beneficial act, where you take a problem and find a solution to the problem that will benefit the world. I interpret Colton’s response to mean that we, as humans who cohabitate this world, must work together to help everyone feel a sense of belonging. Critical literacy was enacted through the students’ responses and interactions. They were building on conversations that we had in a previous session about belonging and agency. At this point of the study, it was profound to see these two constructs become linked in this short exchange.

For this session, we also read the picturebook *One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia* and participated in reflective conversations. The nonfiction book is about five women who used creativity and innovation to solve the local village’s mounting trash problem. Activism, empowerment, and perseverance are prevalent themes in the book that initiated insightful conversations with the students about how one small, positive

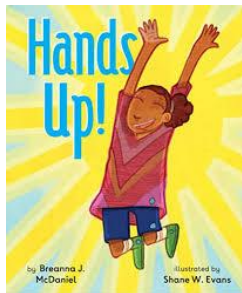
change can have lasting effects. The read-aloud served as a stepping stone for thinking about agency and activism. As a result of this read-aloud and subsequent dramatic engagement activity, the students were talking about the term *volunteer*, because the women in the story were volunteering their time to promote positive and lasting change in their community.

Throughout these meaningful exchanges, it became apparent that the students' notions of being advocates for change were carrying over to their home lives. For example, the dialogic interactions about the topic of volunteerism sparked Quinn's thinking. This conversation triggered him to share a part of his story in which he demonstrated personal agency. He said, "My brother, he volunteered to help me with my idea. Since my mom doesn't have a job, we are gonna, um, we are gonna like sell water for money and give it all to my mom." After that, another student said, "He's using empathy." This complex notion of personal agency displayed in Quinn's story repositions empathy within a larger critical social context. Through Quinn's eyes, he was mediating his experiences of poverty by "using empathy" to try to improve his mother's financial situation. The fact that the other student said "using," as if it is an action, adds complexity to the children's meaning making. This scenario, as mediated through the eyes of the children, draws attention to the curricular space and the literature used as a stepping stone for the children to show empowerment and demonstrate their own personal agency (Ellsworth 310). The social and critical acts displayed by the students emerged as a result of the openings that were provided for them to link the personal experiences to larger social and cultural systems.

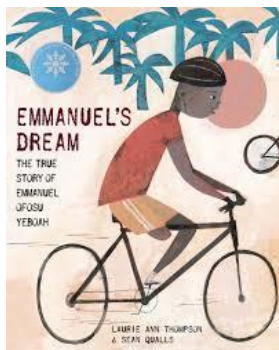
As the session continued, it was evident that the critical and reflective responses from the students show that they were thinking of agency as a beneficial act, where you take a problem and find a solution to the problem that will benefit the world. The second graders were engaging

in rich and meaningful conversations that developed overtime as a result of using high-quality international children’s literature about a variety of topics.

The following selection of texts can be used to discuss advocacy and positive societal change through personal and collective agency.

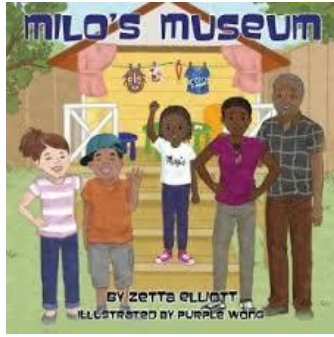


Hands Up! (2019; McDaniel) is a story that celebrates Black joy and reframes the phrase “Hands up!” to represent strength and resistance. The picturebook provides opportunities for young readers to investigate topics around agency, empowerment, and collective community acts that elevate the importance of social responsibility. Additionally, this book can prompt readers to explore topics about unequal power structures while building on principles of anti-racism. Having conversations about race and about the reframing of the phrase “Hands up” can help address biases and challenge assumptions. Educating for empowerment on topics surrounding race can lead to increased solidarity in diverse groups.



Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofose Yeboah (2015; Thompson) is a true story about a young boy who spreads a message that a disability is not an inability. After biking across Ghana with one leg, Emmanuel’s display of personal agency helped make positive changes across his community by drawing attention to the resources needed and other ways to foster inclusion for those living with disabilities. The story can initiate conversations about activism, charity, and other ways to support the unique needs of all people.

Milo’s Museum (2016; Elliot) is a powerful story about the importance of representation. The young protagonist takes a trip to the museum and recognizes people who look like her are not



represented in the museum. As a result, Milo takes action and wants to see change in the form of accurate representations of her family's history. Discussions using this picturebook can include the actions taken by the protagonist to initiate change along with topics about building community and confronting ideas that perpetuate social inequality.

Supporting Self-Reflection and Critical Thinking

How might children's literature support critical thinking, self-reflection, and collaboration?

When choosing literature to use in an early childhood setting, it is important to delve into topics of social issues that may be prevalent in the school community. This can provide space for students to share their ideas and respond to the ideas of others in a way that allows for disagreement, but still values each student's perspective. During one of my weekly visits, the students interrogated multiple viewpoints while investigating the topic of bullying as shown in the picturebook *Each Kindness*. In the story, Maya, the new girl, attempts to make friends with Chloe and the other girls but faces continual rejection after repeated attempts. When Chloe's teacher encourages the students to consider how small gestures of kindness can have a ripple effect, Chloe misses the opportunity. When Maya doesn't return to school, Chloe feels a sense of loss for being unkind and for not trying to make friends with the new student. In response to this interactive read-aloud, the children did not shy away from stating that it was not right to leave someone out.

During the read-aloud, I asked the students to think about why Chloe was having trouble thinking of something nice to say when the teacher asked them to drop a pebble in the bucket, representing kindness rippling out. Rachel inferred, "It was probably because she was being

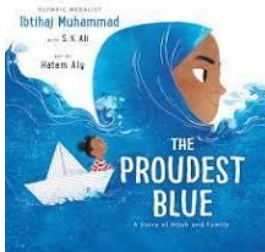
mean to Maya.” After that, Lila suggested, “Maybe she is going to lie about something [instead].” It was interesting for me to hear Lila suggest this, as if lying was the follow-up to being unkind.

At the end of the story, when Maya moved away, Chloe was left feeling like she lost an opportunity for showing kindness. As a way to provide an opening for students to make sense of this event, I asked them to create a still scene, using the drama strategy tableaux, to represent how they thought Chloe was feeling. Tableaux is a dramatic engagement where participants make still images in statue-like form to represent interpretations or scenes from the text. When I asked Ella how she was making meaning of what happened in the text, she said, “I was thinking I need to apologize.” As the students were digesting this moment in the story and extending the learning through tableaux, it was almost as if a hush fell across the room. Essentially, the mood of the room changed to match the scene where an opportunity for spreading kindness was missed.

This was particularly powerful for me to watch because this was a very realistic scenario that we were exploring. It is quite possible that in a second-grade classroom, a victim of bullying and a perpetrator could disrupt normalcy and cause a shift in mood just like what happened in this learning encounter. This event was meaningful for several reasons. First, the embodied literacy practices enhanced the learning to include mood and action. In essence, the students were imagining themselves in a real situation by playing with imagination and inquiry. Moreover, the students were very meaningfully negotiating diverse perspectives. Their actions and interactions showed evidence that they were paying attention to larger social systems and that they were defining compassion as a needed action in cases of bullying. This particular event and picture created space and time for the children to critically examine a real social issue.

The following selection of texts can further advance notions of critical thinking, collaborative inquiry, and self-reflection.

They She He Me: Free to Be! (2017; Gonzalez and SG) is a picturebook about pronouns and gender fluidity. This thought-provoking yet minimalist storyline provides opportunities for young readers to explore topics of identity and kindness through the use of nonbinary gender terminology.



The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family (2019; Muhammad) is a picturebook about pride and self-reflection as a young girl witnesses her sister face bullying when she wears her “first-day hijab” to school. This book can be used as an opening to discuss family relationships and ways to show empowerment through self-confidence and resilience.



A Different Pond (2017; Phi) is a story that melds together the experiences of a refugee family from Vietnam, the challenges faced with assimilation, and the love between a young boy and his father. Reviewing this book from the lens of critical inquiry, facilitators could initiate discussions about poverty, discrimination, and the challenges associated with emigrating to a new land.

<p>Themes around Communities of Conscience</p>	<p>Picturebooks</p>
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Creating Communities of Care	<i>The Big Umbrella</i> , Ann June Bates <i>Outside, Inside</i> , Pham LeUyen <i>One of a Kind, Like Me / Único Como Yo</i> , Laurin Mayeno <i>My Name Is Songoel</i> , Karen Williams and Khadra Mohammad
Exhibiting Social Responsibility	<i>Hands Up!</i> , Breanna McDaniel <i>Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofose Yeboah</i> , Laurie Ann Thompson <i>Milo's Museum</i> , Zetta Elliot <i>One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia</i> , Miranda Paul
Supporting Self-Reflection and Critical Thinking	<i>They She He Me: Free to Be!</i> , Maya Gonzalez and Matthew SG <i>The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family</i> , Ibthaj Muhammad <i>A Different Pond</i> , Bao Phi <i>Each Kindness</i> , Jacqueline Woodson

Table 1
Picturebook Sets to (Re)Imagine a More Inclusive World

Moving Beyond Imagining a More Inclusive World

There are many ways to view and understand the world. To challenge the status quo, to enact positive social change, and to stand up for equality and social justice requires an understanding of multiple truths. Through collaborative inquiry in an elementary classroom setting, children can actively and critically create meaning together through multimodal forms of learning. To raise critical awareness, it is necessary to create learning opportunities that are genuine and full of real-world conversations about cultural affiliations, diversity of opinion, and social issues that people face each day. In doing so, the children learn how creative thinking and critical problem solving can tease out tensions and challenge personal assumptions that come up in conversations about social issues.

A variety of complex issues can be explored through the use of children's literature. Careful selection of texts spanning a wide range of topics can be used to broaden perspectives through critical inquiry, introspection, and self-reflection. By providing openings for our young people to foster inclusive practices, to show empowerment by advocating for change, and to continuously reflect on their own perceptions of social justice, we can make great gains and

move beyond simply imagining a more inclusive world to putting these thoughts and ideas into actionable change.

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