FOSTERING CRITICAL MULTICULTURALISM
THROUGH READ-ALOUDS IN A PRIMARY CLASSROOM

by

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ABSTRACT

This action research project asked the question, “How can interactive read-alouds further the goals of critical multiculturalism?” Engaging students with multicultural literature that deals with issues of diversity, inequity, and social justice has often been a difficult task for teachers in the primary grades. Teachers often do not go into their teaching positions prepared with knowledge of multicultural literature, and literature present in classrooms does not always present scenarios that challenge students to think critically about social justice issues. This paper will investigate how a teacher can incorporate critical multicultural goals into the primary classroom through the practice of interactive read-alouds.
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CHAPTER 1—LITERATURE REVIEW

Engaging students with multicultural literature that deals with issues of diversity, inequity, and social justice has often been a difficult task for teachers in the primary grades (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; MacPhee, 1997; O'Neil, 2010). Teachers often do not go into their teaching positions prepared with knowledge of multicultural literature (Brinson, 2012) and literature present in classrooms does not always present scenarios that challenge students to think critically about social justice issues (Cai, 2002; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Lewison et al., 2002). In this chapter, I will review the existing research literature related to how a teacher in the primary grades can challenge students to examine these social justice issues while taking a critical multiculturalist perspective.

Multiculturalism

The origin of multiculturalism can be understood in the context of the civil rights movement in the United States that occurred in the 1950's and 1960's (Spring, 2010). Spring writes that two factors led to the multiculturalism movement: new waves of immigrants coming to the United States, and ethnic social groups such as Native Americans, Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans standing up for their equal rights in public schools. Banks (1994) sees these developments as a challenge for American society “to create a cohesive and democratic society while at the same time allowing citizens to maintain their ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and primordial identities” (p. 4).
According to Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), *multiculturalism* is a term with several meanings. Kinchloe and Steinberg describe five different paradigms within multiculturalism: *conservative multiculturalism, liberal multiculturalism, pluralist multiculturalism, left-essentialist multiculturalism*, and *critical multiculturalism*. The first four paradigms are described below in order to better articulate the position and goals of critical multiculturalism.

Conservative multiculturalism sees the introduction of multicultural curriculum into the canon as antagonistic towards Western, dominant culture (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Schlesinger, 1991). This view tends toward perceiving non-Western cultures as deficient and with a need to assimilate into the dominant culture in order to gain economic mobility. In contrast, critical multiculturalism recognizes the agency of people who don't identify with the dominant culture (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). Where conservative multiculturalists uphold a patriarchal, Eurocentric view of society, critical multiculturalists recognize the historical oppression of non-European-American cultures. This view leads a critical multiculturalist to challenge the conservative values that have led to historical oppression and create a new consciousness and direction for society.

Liberal multiculturalism puts an emphasis on the similarity of all humanity and subscribes to the doctrine of color-blindness (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). Color-blind liberals claim to not see color, and to see all individuals as equal. They see solutions such as greater representation of African American characters in media as a solution to what liberals consider the multicultural problem. This view is seen as problematic by critical
multiculturalists who see representations such as *The Cosby Show* that lack episodes dealing the effects of structural racism, leaving viewers with a sense that we live in a post-racial society where all individuals can achieve the American dream, whereas in fact in the United States income inequality and racially segregated communities are increasing (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997).

Pluralist multiculturalism celebrates diversity, but like the liberal view, often limits this celebration to representation without a critical analysis of the power asymmetries that exist based on differences (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). Left-essentialist multiculturalism is a rigid view of social group identity where certain characteristics of an African American or female experience, for example, are upheld as authentic and essential elements of their identity. Through the lens of critical multiculturalism, *The Cosby Show* could be reexamined as a singular representation of an African American experience (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997).

Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) assert that critical multiculturalism examines power inequities that exist in particular social setting. Self-reflection is encouraged in order to examine how one's particular beliefs are influenced by the dominant culture. Critical multiculturalism recognizes that the institution of schooling is never politically neutral and often mediates social reproduction of inequities among social groups (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997).

**Multiculturalism in the Primary Grades**

Children enter the public school system with problematic beliefs about race (Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Rennebohm-Franz, 1996). In a study of kindergarten children's
bias based on race, Phinney and Rotheram (as cited in Banks, 1995) found that both White children and Children of Color have “White bias” where children demonstrated a prejudice against non-White people. This research shows that racial bias is learned early in children's lives, before they even enter the school building. It is important that children be given opportunities to explore racial identity in the primary grades in order to provide a base for their positive racial identity development (Tatum, 1997).

Young children can come into schools with cultural misconceptions and assumptions that they have acquired from previous generations (Rennebohm-Franz, 1996). These assumptions must be challenged through integration of diverse cultures in the curriculum (Banks, 1994). Through reading about the experiences of different cultures, students can see a more complete picture of how other social groups' lives differ from their own (MacPhee, 1997).

**Multicultural Literature**

Multicultural literature is one way that teachers have found to integrate multiculturalism into their curriculum (Ketter & Lewis, 2001; MacPhee, 1997; Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007). It is important that multicultural literature is written by a member of the social group represented in the literature in order to provide a more authentic representation of experiences of that social group (Cai, 2002). Teaching multicultural literature should give students opportunities to explore multiple perspectives on their social group and the social groups of those around them through perspective-taking (Thein et al., 2007).
**Teacher Preparation**

Teachers entering schools often don't have a broad knowledge of multicultural children's books (Brinson, 2012) or the goals of multiculturalism (Ketter & Lewis, 2001). Brinson (2012) suggests that teachers should prepare themselves better for teaching in a classroom with diversity by looking at guidelines for selecting multicultural literature. Having opportunities to reflect on life experiences that involved inequity based on racism, sexism, classism, or ableism is essential for pre-service and in-service teachers in order to prepare them for teaching multicultural curriculum (Camp & Oesterreich, 2010).

In their study of transformative experiences of doctoral students in a program focused on multicultural education, Vescio, Bondy, and Poekert (2009) asked, “What impact did the seminar have on participants' beliefs and practices, and what features of the seminar explain the impact?” The study setting was a fall 2006 doctoral program seminar entitled Critical Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Teacher Education. Past seminars had included culturally diverse students, but all of the seven participants who agreed to take part in this study were European-American (five female and two male). Two of the researchers were doctoral students who had participated in past seminars and the third researcher was the seminar facilitator.

Vescio et al. (2009) found that there were two conditions that led to transformative learning in multicultural education: 1) conflict and dissonance of ideas and beliefs were normalized among the group, and 2) multiple ways of making sense of these new ideas and beliefs were provided. These experiences led to the participants going beyond simply learning about multicultural issues. Teachers credited the
normalizing of conflict and multiple ways of making sense with transforming their ideas and beliefs about multicultural issues (Vescio et al., 2009).

The dependability of the study is evident from other similar studies that show a need for multiple perspectives and normalized conflict (Camp, & Oesterreich, 2010; Ketter & Lewis, 2001). The study's context is described thoroughly, thus strengthening the transferability. The confirmability of the study is solid because the methodology was described in detail.

**Reader-Response Theory**

To be prepared to teach multicultural literature, teachers should have an understanding of what it means to read. Rosenblatt (1982) stated that reading is a “transaction” between readers and text (p. 268). This transaction is altered by the stance readers take while reading the text. The readers can take an efferent stance in which they see what they can “carry away” from the text, or they can take an aesthetic stance where the readers read with a focus on what is evoked from within themselves during the reading (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 269). These stances are not opposites that contradict, but exist on a continuum where the reader's “selective attention” can be pulled into a predominantly efferent or aesthetic response (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 269).

Lewis (2000) sees a problem in a commonly misapplied practice of reader-response methods wherein readers are guided towards a personal aesthetic stance, but never get to a critical stance that challenges their personal experience. Multicultural literature can give students an opportunity to do this transaction to gain insight into the experiences of other social groups (MacPhee, 1997). MacPhee (1997) posits from her
experience as a teacher that multicultural literature should be used with the explicit purpose of having students confront “social issues and vicariously experienc[e] other sociocultural contexts” (p. 39). This reading experience begins with the aesthetic response in which a reader connects with the text but then reflects on this experience from a critical, efferent stance (Cai, 2008).

Multiculturalism addresses the growing recognition of various social groups who have suffered from and resisted historical oppression. Multicultural education has evolved over its existence into many different paradigms (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). As one of those paradigms, critical multiculturalism owes many of its tenets to a method of teaching called critical pedagogy.

Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire (1970) put forth a model of education that broke away from the banking model of traditional education that sees students as blank slates to which knowledge is transmitted. He instead implemented a problem-posing model that saw students as developing a critical lens to better read their world (Freire, 1970). This method of teaching that Freire proposed has come to be known as critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2003).

Critical pedagogy primarily deals with the dynamics between knowledge and power (McLaren, 2003). In the traditional model of education, canonical knowledge is created and transmitted from teacher to student (Shor, 1992). In this problem-posing model of education, students are expected to question this official knowledge (Apple, 2000).
Critical Literacy

Critical literacy allows for examination of the power relationships that are present between readers and authors (Norris, Lucas & Prudhoe, 2012). Labadie, Wetzel, and Rogers (2012) devised prompts during reading that orient students toward taking a critical stance in relation to their reading. Prompts such as “How are the characters/setting represented in the illustrations and how does it make you feel?” and “Which characters/scenes are in the illustrations? Who or what is left out?” have students take a critical stance toward literary texts (Labadie et al, 2012).

Drawing from 30 years of research, Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) created a four-part framework for understanding critical literacy in the classroom. In the first dimension, disrupt the commonplace, students are prompted to challenge the assumptions that are taken for granted in a text. The second dimension, interrogate multiple perspectives, has students take on perspectives other than their own in order to understand the experiences of others. With the third dimension, focus on socio-political issues, students often make personal or intertextual connections through reading, but this dimension has students deal with the larger social and political issues of the world. The fourth dimension, take a stand toward social justice, flows from the previous three and has students taking action based on the work they have already done to challenge assumptions, take on multiple perspectives, and deal with socio-political issues. Lewison et al (2002) argue that perhaps the most difficult turn to make when presenting multicultural literature is to find a way for students to take a stand toward social justice.
Teachers in the primary grades sometimes struggle with getting students to take up discussing and writing about the issues of power and inequality (Lewison et al., 2002).

Within the framework of critical literacy, teachers utilize different practices to provide reading experiences that support its goals. One practice teachers use is literature circles. Fain (2008) studied how first- and second-grade students discuss issues of language and cultural diversity in literature circles. The participants in this study were 22 first and second graders (13 females and nine males) in an urban, multi-age English-Immersion classroom. The classroom included 19 Latino/a children, two European-American children, and one Chinese-American child. The data was collected in the form of 40 audio recordings, 16 written transcripts, and 23 journals and notes from the field. This data was collected in order to examine student language and thoughts on cultural diversity. Coding of the data was focused on finding instances of “literacy, identity, positionality within society, oppression, and resistance to structural inequality” (p. 202). For the purposes of this study, the researcher focused on oppression, with special attention to issues of racism and how an oppressor operates. Findings included instances of students taking multiple perspectives, disrupting the commonplace, and other such important concepts in critical literacy. The findings suggest that students need to be given space to reflect critically about their own thinking on social issues.

The dependability of the study is strong because the findings about critical literacy are similar to those in other studies (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012; Lewison et al., 2002; Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007). This study takes place in a multi-age, English Immersion classroom. The transparency in the description of the student population
strengthens transferability. This article was peer reviewed and had triangulation (audio recordings, written transcripts, journals, field notes). The researcher provided a thorough description of how she did her research which included how the literature circles were put together and the books that she used.

**Critical Multiculturalism**

The philosophies of critical pedagogy and multiculturalism are melded together to clarify the overly broad definition of multiculturalism (Cai, 2008). Critical multiculturalism, as defined by Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), is “dedicated to the notion of egalitarianism and the elimination of human suffering” and seeks to change institutionalized inequity (p. 24). Through critical multiculturalism, students find multiple ways of analyzing multicultural literature through whole-class read-alouds (Sipe, 2000) and explore social justice issues through critical reading (Fain, 2008).

**Interactive Read-Alouds**

The value of read-alouds in the primary grades is a contentious subject (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). Research has found that simply reading aloud to students in these early grades can put students behind classmates who receive a more active instruction (Meyer, Wardrop, Stahl, & Linn, 1994). In order to deepen children’s learning and aid in literacy development, students should be engaged in analytic talk while the book is being read (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Sipe, 2000). It is important for young children to learn through talking collaboratively about their thinking during read-alouds (Hoffman, 2011; Pantaleo, 2007; Wiseman, 2011). Through co-constructing the meaning of a text, students
both learn to make sense of the reading and also create a shared understanding of the world (Panaleo, 2007).

The literature on the reading achievements for students also shows that vocabulary acquisition is particularly aided through the use of interactive read-alouds (see, for example, Gonzalez et al., 2014; Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Silverman, 2007). However, some research found that the focus on reading skills neglects to teach students to make sense of their world through other modes such as the illustrations in picturebooks (Martens, Martens, Doyle, Loomis & Aghalarov, 2012). A critical multiculturalist would expand the narrow scientific focus on the acquisition of skills to favor the development of cognitive abilities of all students (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997).

**Practices of Interactive Read-Alouds**

The specific practices of interactive read-alouds have not often been described in detail in the research articles that study it (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004). Fisher et al. (2004) studied read-aloud practices in search of the consistent practices that expert teachers implemented in their interactive read-alouds. There were two sets of participants selected for this study. In the first group, 25 expert teachers (as identified by their principals) from 25 schools were selected randomly from a pool of 45 teachers. In the second group, 120 teachers were selected randomly from 284 teachers who had been chosen by San Diego State University as cooperating teachers for student teaching. These teachers taught grades three through eight.

While observing the first group of teachers, Fisher et al. (2004) made observational notes so that they could find patterns of practice in the read-alouds. While
observing the second group, the researchers rated the read-alouds using a Likert-type scale to note whether they saw the same patterns of practice from the first (expert) group. After observations were done, taped interviews with 18 randomly selected teachers from group two took place. These interviews clarified motives behind planning and practices of the read-alouds. The researchers found that all expert teachers selected for the study had seven practices in common:

- books chosen were appropriate to students' interests and matched to their developmental, emotional, and social levels;
- selections had been previewed and practiced by the teacher;
- a clear purpose for the read-aloud was established;
- teachers modeled fluent oral reading when they read the text;
- teachers were animated and used expression;
- teachers stopped periodically and thoughtfully questioned the students to focus them on specifics of the text; and
- connections were made to independent reading and writing.

The dependability of the study is more difficult to determine because this is a unique study, but the findings are consistent with the interactive practices of other studies (Hoffman, 2011; Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012; Wiseman, 2011). The sample size of randomly selected expert teachers was 25 for the first group and 120 additional teachers were randomly selected for second group strengthens the transferability of the study. The methodology of the study was described thoroughly and the complex design of the study helps to ensure credible research. The process of observing expert teacher read-aloud
practices, then checking in with a wider pool of teachers to see how widespread the practices were, demonstrates a clear desire to get a realistic view of read-aloud practices. On the other hand, the initial selection of expert teachers was done by administrators in the schools, when it would have been more appropriate for teachers to select expert teachers. The researchers wanted administrators to pick teachers who regularly presented during professional development, were seen as excellent teachers, or whose students had “significant reading achievement” (p. 9). This initial selection process leaves out teachers who don't fit an administrator's view of who can be characterized as an excellent teacher.

**Conclusion**

Teachers need to be better prepared to teach critical thinking about social justice issues. Desired student outcomes for critical multicultural education would be perspective taking (Thein et al., 2007), challenging the dominant narrative (Kincheleoe & Steinberg, 1997), transformative learning (Vescio et al., 2009), and social justice action (Lewison et al, 2002). These goals can be furthered though interactive read-alouds where the teacher utilizes the best practices to ensure student engagement (Fisher et al., 2004).

In order to explore these topics, I posed the research question, “How can interactive read-alouds further the goals of critical multiculturalism in the primary classroom?” In addressing this question, I have explored the practice of interactive read-alouds from the perspective of critical multiculturalism. Student learning is centered on their cognitive ability to critically examine the literature in the read-alouds.
CHAPTER 2– DATA COLLECTION

**Interactive Read-alouds**

The practice that I will be studying will be interactive read-alouds and their capacity for furthering the goals of critical multiculturalism – which entails objectives such as perspective taking, challenging the dominant narrative, transformative learning, and social justice action. In an interactive read-aloud, a text is read by the teacher and students are both encouraged and prompted to speak about the text before, during, and after the reading (Fisher et al., 2004). This practice can further the goals of critical multiculturalism through helping students critically examine the issues of power that underlie the multicultural literature that I will read with the students (Kinchemoe & Steinberg, 1997).

In this study, my mentor teacher and I have selected texts carefully to ensure that students will be presented with opportunities to connect with the reading that are based on their interests (Fisher et al., 2004). Another consideration in selecting texts was to find books that would challenge students to think critically about the content of the readings (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012). The third consideration was to present students with multicultural literature that would describe the complexity of issues around marginalized social groups. These considerations supported students’ transformative learning experiences where they explore social justice issues that are at the heart of American society.

This research study was conducted during my first student teaching placement. I had already spent three weeks in the classroom teaching lessons and getting to know the
students. In fact, I conducted read-alouds with the students before I began video recording and collecting student writing for analysis. These initial read-alouds set ways of interacting between the students and myself.

Over a five-week period, students took part in interactive read-alouds centered around multicultural literature that deal with social justice issues. I sat in a wooden chair facing the students as they sat cross-legged in clustered rows facing me. As I read, I held the picturebook open for students to see the illustrations. The books featured situations where characters confront conflicts between different cultures in American society. Students were given prompts to critically examine these situations as they occurred in the readings (Labadie et al., 2012).

**Books**

For the first interactive read-aloud, I read the book *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991). *Amazing Grace* is the story of a young girl who loves to use her imagination to take on various characters from different cultures all over the world. At a crucial part in the story, Grace decides she wants to play Peter Pan in the school play, but other students vocally object to the idea of Grace playing Peter Pan. These students see Peter Pan as essentially White and male. At this point in the read-aloud, I paused and interjected, “I wonder how often Grace hears things like that. She can't do this or that because she's a girl or because she's Black. What do you think?” This prompt is meant to spark a curiosity and discussion about micro-aggressions. The remainder of the books that were used is represented along with *Amazing Grace* in Table 1 below. The books that were
chosen came from my mentor teacher's classroom. All of the books are typical multicultural children's books that are widely available.

Table 1

*Children's Books Used in Interactive Read-Alouds*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Critical focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>How My Parents Learned to Eat</em></td>
<td>Friedman (1987)</td>
<td>Japan, Tableware, Manners and Customs</td>
<td>Cross-Cultural Exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Oliver Button is a Sissy</em></td>
<td>dePaola (1979)</td>
<td>Dancing, Sex roles</td>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Very Special Critter</em></td>
<td>Mayer &amp; Mayer (1993)</td>
<td>Disability, New student</td>
<td>Disrupting the Commonplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Voices in the Park</em></td>
<td>Browne (2001)</td>
<td>Gorilla, Park, Dogs</td>
<td>Multiple Perspectives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participants**

Millard Fillmore Elementary School\(^1\) is located in a suburban neighborhood in the Pacific Northwest. The entire school population's ethnic identities are 13.1% Hispanic, 58.8% European American (non-Hispanic), 7.3% African American (non-Hispanic), 7.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.2% Native American or Native Alaskan, with 11.9% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. The first-grade classroom in which this study took place will include 10 female and 10 male students with 13 students who are European American, three students who are African American, two students who are Latino, and two students who are Asian American.

\(^1\) All names are pseudonyms.
The school serves a community with a large population of military families where parents or guardians are often deployed or are moving their families to a new base. According to the Department of Defense (2009), military families tend to move on average every two to three years. During the 2013-2014 school year in one classroom, six families moved out of the school district, removing their children from the classroom.

Data Collection

The data collected for this study came in three different forms: video recorded read-alouds with audio transcripts, student writing and drawing, and short self-reflections. I had planned on including pre- and postinterviews with focus students, but the attempts at interviews were plagued with technology issues and by time constraints. I decided to write short reflections on the research process instead so that I could draw from an additional source of data. These three sources of data were compared in the analysis of the data to ensure corroboration of the findings. The different data sources provided triangulation in order to strengthen the credibility of the study.

Videotaped Read-Alouds

I videotaped and transcribed five interactive read-alouds. This data allowed me to review the discussion that occurred during the readings. In order to video record the read-alouds, I placed my smart phone's camera on a student desk next to the area where the read-alouds occurred. After the read-alouds, I uploaded the digital video to my desktop computer for viewing and transcribing.
Student Writing and Drawing

Students were asked to write about the reading and draw a picture to go along with the writing. The students were told to write about the most important part of the book. Students could choose what they wrote about as long as their responses related to the book that they had just read. This allowed for a range of response and minimized any funneling of student responses toward what I hoped to see confirmed in student exploration of the goals of critical multiculturalism.

Field Notes

As the read-alouds began, I started writing field notes on how the research was developing. These notes explored the decisions I was making from read-aloud to read-aloud and how the goals of critical multiculturalism were being furthered by the interactive read-alouds.

Analysis

The first step taken in analysis of the data collected was to begin the transcription of the videos. I started by simply watching the videos all the way through. I then went through and typed sections that included prompts and student responses. At the same time that I was transcribing video, I began finding patterns in student work. Student work was sorted into emergent categories that were constructed as I reviewed them individually. Once I found patterns within each set of student work, I looked for themes across all student work. As I found patterns and themes in student work, I began organizing transcripts in order to analyze them.
The analysis of the videorecorded read-alouds began as I transcribed them. The process of transcription required me to pay close attention to what students were saying in each response they gave to prompts during the reading. The patterns that I saw in the student work shifted to align with the patterns I saw in the video transcriptions. Comparing all data sets, I began to see themes throughout the data. With these themes, I began organizing and writing chapter three of this paper. As I wrote more and reflected, I saw the themes shift to their current form.

Limitations

The methodology of my study should produce findings that are credible because I have triangulated data sources (video with transcripts, student work, and field notes). The reflections that I completed as the research progressed should strengthen the dependability of the study. The findings of this study can be transferred to any other primary grade classroom that has interactive read-alouds and I have provided a detailed description of the methodology used so that there is confirmabilty. This study takes a stance for social justice. As a researcher, I hope to better understand how to teach with a focus on transforming the curriculum.
CHAPTER 3– FINDINGS

Findings

This research project asked how interactive read-alouds could further the goals of critical multiculturalism – which entails objectives such as perspective taking, challenging the dominant narrative, transformative learning, and social justice action.

Over the course of five weeks, I read five different multicultural picture books to students. During the read-aloud, I delivered a series of prompts designed to provoke a critical response to the literature. After the read-alouds, students wrote about what the most important part of the story had been. After read-alouds, I would write field notes about how the read-alouds were going. After this data was collected, I began the analysis to find patterns. Through a complex process of coding, memoing, and re-coding across the data sets, patterns began to emerge. These patterns began to make sense as themes as I reflected on field notes and attempting to answer my research question. My findings fit into four categories: the need for friendship and bonding, noticing different perspectives, first grade understandings of oppression, and social construction of thinking.

The Need For Friendship and Bonding

As I wrote field notes, one of my concerns that showed up multiple times was the struggle to have a developmentally appropriate discussion that spoke to the psychological needs of first grade students. Part of the critical multicultural perspective is a rejection of the simple celebration of diversity in which teachers limit the study of diverse cultures to subjects such as food and festivals. I felt that I might be pushing students too much to
face uncomfortable socio-political issues such as racism and sexism without having a celebration of diversity at all.

As I began to transcribe the videos and find patterns in student work, I noticed that across the data sets, students were talking mostly about the friendships in the stories. Each story had a sociopolitical tension that might have kept the characters apart, but this was not what students saw as the most important part of any of the stories. Students noticed more that the characters ended up being friends than noticing the tension between them.

In the book *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 2001), the character Smudge asks Charles to play with her. Charles is a little nervous to be playing with Smudge, and Smudge thinks that Charles might be a wimp, but he agrees and soon enough they're both having fun together. This exchange between the characters was a familiar one to most of the students in my classroom. The transcript from the read-aloud below shows that they were quick to notice what was going on between Smudge and Charles.

Teacher: So just a couple quiet thumbs. What do we notice?
Noah: That they became friends.
Teacher: Okay. So we're noticing that they're becoming friends. Do you have anything more to say about that?
Noah: No.
Teacher: No? Okay. Let's see. One more. Tyler.
Tyler: That this is a kid voice.
Teacher: Oh, this is a kid voice. That's another noticing. Okay.
In these student responses, it's evident that a student is noticing that the characters are becoming friends and that the current perspective in the story is a kid voice. When Noah noticed that they were becoming friends, Tyler followed up with an observation about the young age of the current main character. The students are seeing that this scene is one that reflects a common experience among them. This speaks to the developmental needs of students in primary grades. They seek out friendship for play. As the read-aloud continues, more students notice the friendship between Charles and Smudge.

Teacher: What are we noticing? I'll wait for more quiet thumbs.

Sarah: so they're starting becoming friends they're starting to do things together and play together and talk together.

Teacher: So they're starting to become friends. Do you want to say more about that?
Sarah: No.

Teacher: Okay. I've heard that a couple times now – that are they're starting to become friends. Other things that you're noticing. Let's see. Wayne.

Wayne: That the owner of it keeps playing with it and the other things is, back a little bit, I saw the owner playing on the slide and now they're playing on – what do you call it?

Teacher and other students: See saw.

Wayne: Yeah.

Teacher: So they're playing on different playground equipment. Okay. Thanks, Wayne.
These comments are more examples of students noticing the friendship between Charles and Smudge. Sarah reiterates that the characters are becoming friends and Wayne adds that they are on playground equipment. These student observations show that students are concerned with the togetherness of friendship. The students see themselves in the story through the children as opposed to the two previous adult characters with whom they were less connected.

After the read-aloud of *Voices in the Park*, the students moved to their desks to complete a writing task. They were told to respond to the prompt “What was the most important part of the story?” The students were encouraged to both write words and draw a picture. Some students were still working on developing their writing skills to be able to put their thoughts down on paper. For these students, I asked that they put a lot of effort into their drawing. Figure 1 shows a student's work that deals with the friendship between Smudge and Charles. This student highlighted this friendship to be the most important part of the story. This valuing of friendship is a further reflection of the developmental needs of first grade students.

**Noticing Different Perspectives**

In the book *Voices in the Park*, the same story is told from four different perspectives. The first two perspectives were adults in the children's lives. The students referred to these two characters as “the yelling voice” and “the lazy voice,” but they didn't choose to write about either of these characters in their writing after the read-aloud. During the read-aloud and in their writing, the students were fast to notice that the two children in the story, Charles and Smudge, were becoming friends despite coming from
Figure 1. This student drew two characters from *Voices in the Park* becoming friends.
different social-economic situations. Near the end of the story, Charles is being led by his mother out of the park after abruptly ending the time that he was playing with Smudge. I asked students to tell me what they were noticing. The following is a transcription of an interaction during the read-aloud with a student named Billy.

Teacher: What are we noticing?

Billy: That they were really good friends. They really did one play longer with each other so that they could learn from each other.

Teacher: So, wow, Billy just said something really cool. What he said was they really wanted to play together more and they would learn things from each other. Can you say some more things about learning things from each other?

Billy: Like they would learn how to do things like cartwheels and handstands and other kinds of things.

Billy's comments reflected the observation among the students that Charles and Smudge became friends in the story. Students connected with this aspect of the story more than the perspectives of the adult characters in the story. Billy also saw that the two characters could learn things from each other. In the story, Smudge and Charles came from different socioeconomic situations. Smudge's father was despondent in looking for a job and Charles mother was short-tempered and from the upper class. Since these two children came from different backgrounds, they could teach each other things. Billy's perception of the assets that the two characters have to offer one another began to take into account the different perspectives in the story. This aligns with my intent for students to respond to the four different perspectives in the book.
In the book *How My Parents Learned to Eat* (Friedman, 1987), a child recounts the story of how her Japanese mother and American father learned to eat the food of each others cultures. This book was meant to be a way for students to examine a cross-cultural exchange. During the read-aloud, students spoke about the Japanese and American cultures were different in the manners they used and the ways that they ate. Students also noticed that they were practicing how to eat for each other. In the students' writing, most all of the students wrote about this cultural exchange and drew the mother and father eating together. There were two outliers that choose to focus solely on the love story between the mother and father, but this still connects with a larger pattern of togetherness that I found throughout the data sets. In Figure 2 below, a student has written about how the main characters taught each other how to eat. This student also represented these different ways of eating by drawing a two-frame picture with chopsticks on the Japanese side and forks and knives on the American side. In Figure 3 below, a similar response is shown in which the student saw the cultural exchange as the most important part of the story and represented the two characters visiting restaurants to learn different ways of eating. Both of these examples show that students were able to recognize that the characters in the story held different perspectives and could learn from one another.

In the book *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (de Paola, 1979), Oliver was taunted by boys who thought that he was a sissy for doing ballet. I asked the class what they thought these boys were thinking. In the transcript below, a student in the classroom named Monique was able to both speculate on what they were thinking, and she also offered her own perspective.
Figure 2. This student drew the different perspectives of the mother and father.
Teacher: So what were the boys thinking? Tell me about these boys. What are they thinking? Monique.

Monique: Maybe they're saying that he's like a girl.

Teacher: Yeah, they're saying he's like a girl.

Monique: Ballet is kinda for girls.

Teacher: Is ballet for girls?

Whole Class: No! Yes!

Teacher: Are there boy ballerinas? Does anyone disagree?

Not only did Monique tell us what the boys in the story were thinking, she was also able to give her own perspective that “ballet is kinda for girls.” This perspective that ballet is for one gender sparked immediate, impassioned responses from the rest of the class.

About half of the students thought that ballet was a girl thing and the other half had seen boys do ballet. In the continuation of the discussion below, a boy in the classroom named Tyler was able to relate a story of seeing a male ballerina. This comment from Tyler helps Monique think about the perspective of the boys more in depth.

Teacher: You've seen a boy who was a ballerina? Tell us more about that.

Tyler: It was when I - I forget but I remember it was when I was a baby and it was on TV.

Teacher: Okay so there are some boys that are ballerinas

Monique: Well maybe the boys think there's not such a thing as that.

Teacher: Say more about that.

Monique: Well, I think the boys think they see it not like a boy thing.
Figure 3. This student saw the importance of the cross-cultural exchange.
Teacher: So the boys think it's not a boy thing and you're saying they've never seen...

Monique: Yeah, I think they're saying that because they've never seen a boy ballerina. Monique recognized that the boys who taunted Oliver might not have ever seen a male ballerina and this could be why they bullied Oliver. The attempt to make sense of a bully's intentions shows that Monique was able to consider perspectives that weren't made explicit in the text.

These students' showed through their discussion during the read-aloud and the writing that came after the read-aloud that they were able to consider different perspectives in the story. In both *How My Parents Learned to Eat* and *Voices in the Park*, the students saw the perspectives that were explicit in the structure of the story. In *Oliver Button is a Sissy*, Monique was able to recognize a perspective that was not explicit in the story.

**First Grade Understandings of Oppression**

My field notes also show that I was concerned that students weren't able to discuss any type of oppression. My attempts at interviews early in the research put doubts in my mind as to how I could present scenarios to students where they understand the tension between characters based on cultural differences. Although, it was subtle at times, students did express first grade understandings of what oppression looked like to them.

In the book *Oliver Button is a Sissy*, students were quick to see that there would be injustice in the story. During the discussion before the reading, a student predicted that Oliver would be picked on because he did things that girls did. During the read-aloud,
Monique couldn't wait to comment on the mean student who called Oliver Button a sissy for being in the talent show.

Teacher: Even when he's the big star in the talent show, they're still calling him a sissy. Hm.

Monique: That's mean!

Teacher: I wonder about that. What do you all think about that? Even when he's the big star at the talent show, they're still calling him a sissy. Yes, Monique.

Monique: I think they're being bullies.

In these responses, Monique referred to the students who called Oliver a sissy as bullies. This understanding of the students who call Oliver Button a sissy as bullies is at the developmental level of first grade students. Students at this age can talk about bullies and understand that they exercise their power over students who may have less power. Most students would be able to explain how a bully oppresses others and some students would be able to relate stories of how they or other students had been bullied. This understanding of bullies makes it easy for students to see that there is an injustice in how Oliver Button is being treated.

The students work for Oliver Button is a Sissy was less consistent than for other read-alouds. Students wrote about how it was important that Oliver went from “a sissy to a star.” This pattern shows that students saw a progression within Oliver throughout the story. In Figure 4 below, a student wrote about the progress of the rest of the students who saw Oliver in a new light after the talent show. The drawing represents a scene in the book where graffiti that had once called Oliver a sissy had been altered by the students to
Figure 4. This student showed the progression in the other students' thinking.
read that Oliver was know a star. The students writing talked about the most important part of the story being when the other students stopped calling Oliver a sissy. This student who wrote about the characters other than Oliver in the story noticed the oppression that was being used against Oliver in the story. In Figure 5, a student draws Oliver tap dancing at the talent show in the story. The writing underneath the drawing shows that the most important part of the story was that Oliver could be himself. This drawing shows Oliver as a resilient character who could express himself despite whatever the bullies might do. These two examples of student work show that students can examine the cultural hegemony of a school environment as well as the potential for oppressed individuals to express themselves resiliently.

In the book *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991), the protagonist wants to play Peter Pan in the upcoming school play, but other students believe that she can't do this because she's a girl and she's Black. Students had two opportunities to participate in this read-aloud, because the first time I read the book, the camera did not record the session. So to get the data that I needed to analyze, I re-read the book for the students. In this second reading, students were familiar with the story and made particularly pertinent connections such as in the following exchanges.

Teacher: So I wonder if Grace hears things like that very often – things like, “That's a boy's name. You can't do that.” Or things like, “You can't be Peter Pan. He isn't Black.” I wonder if she hears things like that very often. That's what I'm wondering about. What do you all think about that?

Billy: Yes.
Figure 5. This student was able to show the resiliency of Oliver.
Teacher: You think so?

Billy: Because she is Black. The Black people get made fun of.

Teacher: Oh, they get made fun of? Say more about that, Billy.

Billy: I learned this from when I was in kindergarten. Back when they were doing the
    war and stuff, the Black people had to go to one school and the tan people had to
    go to another school so they couldn't be around their families.

Teacher: Yeah, I know what you're talking about. That was a thing called segregation
    that happened a long time ago. A long time ago people used to be segregated
    based on the color of their skin. [pause] We don't do that today, do we?

    [affirmative choral sound] No, we don't do that today.

Teacher: More. Let's see. Alice.

Alice: No.

Teacher: No? Why?

Alice: Because I don't think she's heard that before.

Teacher: Oh, you think she's ever heard that before? Hm. Okay. Let's hear from one
    more person. Braden.

Braden: No, because I think she normally she does plays at home and stuff. Not at
    school.

Teacher: Okay, so maybe she doesn't hear it because she's at home, not amongst the
    kids to hear that. Okay. One more. Did you want to share Monique?

Monique: I think yes because the Black people do usually get made fun of.

Teacher: Oh they get made fun of. Can you say more about that?
Monique: They get made fun of – I don't know why.

Teacher: Yeah. I don't know why.

Billy told a story that included a detail about Jim Crow segregation. Within this story, he introduced the idea that “the Black people get made fun of.” This idea of making fun of someone is a first-grade understanding of indignities that African Americans endured during the Jim Crow era. Although Billy talked about this making fun of in the past tense, Monique saw that this injustice still happens today, but for mysterious reasons that she doesn't know. These students showed that a discussion about both historical and current oppression within society could happen within a first grade classroom. This discussion pulled from students different prior knowledge and led to a co-constructed knowledge of ways that People of Color have been subjected to oppression.

I found that student work for the Amazing Grace reading fell into two main patterns. Most students saw that Grace should be able to do whatever she wants to do despite what her classmates say. However, only a few students wrote about her racial or gender identity playing a role in this decision. In Figure 6, a student was able to write about how Grace could be Peter Pan regardless of her race or gender. This student was a proficient writer who was able to state the understanding in clear descriptive language. Students who were still developing writing skills were able to express gender and racial power dynamics through drawing. In Figure 7, a student was able to draw the idea that Grace was experiencing oppression from other students.

In all of these cases, students showed that first-grade students had particular ways of knowing oppression. In Oliver Button is a Sissy, Monique saw that the characters in
Figure 6. This student saw that Grace could be resilient.
the story were bullies. This image of the bully is a central idea in a first grader's understanding of oppression. In the writing of the students, they were able to show that they understood the progression of the other students’ attitudes in the story and the resiliency of Oliver. With the book *Amazing Grace*, the students got into a discussion about the historical and current oppression for People of Color. The students showed that teachers can build off of first-grade knowledge to gain deeper understandings about oppression in society.

**Social Construction of Thinking**

Throughout the readings, I interjected prompts that were meant to help students think critically about the literature. I would often begin prompts with “I wonder...” or I might ask students what they are noticing. After students shared what they were wondering, I found ways for them to explore their thoughts in more depth, such as when I asked them to “say more about that.” When I used this language, it enabled me to demonstrate expressing curiosity around the power dynamics that were present within the story.

During the last read-aloud of *Amazing Grace*, a couple of students began to use language of critical thinking. Grace had just gone to see the ballet, but a student was still thinking about the part of the story where Grace raised her hand for the part of Peter Pan. I sensed that this student was curious about these other students who acted as foils for Grace, so I asked if he was wondering something.

Chris: I saw the people who were telling her.... It seemed like they were raising their hands too. One was a boy and one was a girl that is tan.
Figure 7. This student was able to show racial tension through drawing.
Teacher: Does that make you wonder something?

Chris: I was wondering if they just don't want her to get picked, they want to get picked.

In this excerpt from the read-alouds, Chris was thinking about the characters in the story that primarily functioned as foils for the protagonist, Grace. Chris was seeing that not only was Grace ambitiously campaigning to be Peter Pan, but other students had an interest in the role as well. In his first statement, it was a little unclear why it was important that other students were raising their hands. When I prompted him further with what he was wondering, he was able to express his curiosity about these other students.

In the discussion that occurred after the reading, another student was able to engage in critical analysis of the reading. This question was posed by the student in relation to how Grace would play at home at the beginning of the story. The exchange below contains this student’s critical analysis of the story.

Johnny: I actually had a question. The first time when we thought she wasn't going to be out for Peter Pan, I wonder if she had any friends.

Teacher: Oh, you wonder if she had any friends in the class already?

Johnny: No, I mean in the whole school and in the town.

Johnny was curious about what we don't know about Grace. He wanted to know what was left out of the story. This thinking was not prompted by his teacher, but internally motivated. This is the finding that I would like to highlight. In this brief practice of encouraging critical responses to multicultural literature, some students were able to take on the task of posing their own questions. I found the discussion open up to more critical
thought about the text once students began using the language included in my prompts. In the context of the interactive read-alouds, the students and I were participating in a social co-construction of thinking. In response to my prompts, students were finding new ways of thinking about the text.

**Limitations**

As a student teacher, I had many competing obligations during this research project. My first priority was to the needs of my students. I taught several subjects – math, reading, writing, science, and art. Each lesson also needed to be documented and presented to my supervisor. My supervisor also came for regular visits where I was assessed on a student teaching rubric. While student teaching, I completed the EdTPA – a teacher performance assessment that required extensive planning, documentation, and writing. All of these obligations limited the amount of time I was able to devote to the read-alouds. These limitations weaken the credibility of my study.

There was also limited time to complete this research because my student teaching placed me in the classroom for only ten weeks. This limited amount of time to complete all of the obligations listed previous and this research project left me with five weeks to complete the read-alouds. This limited time spent on read-alouds meant that the changes that I began noticing in the last read-aloud could have developed more. These limitations also weaken the credibility of my study.

The credibility of my study is strengthened by triangulated data sources (video with transcripts, student work, and field notes). The field notes that I completed as the research progressed strengthen the dependability of the study. The books that I used in
my read-alouds were common multicultural children's literature that are widely available. The detailed description of my methodology strengthened the confirmability of my study. The critical readings of multicultural literature gave my read-alouds a social justice focus.

**Implications**

Interactive read-alouds should be a valuable practice for all teachers, but especially teachers of emerging readers. Students in the primary grades come to school with different understandings of the world. Students co-construct knowledge in relationship with their environment. In order to better understand concepts such as oppression, children need to be able to base their development on prior knowledge. Teachers should be prepared to harness these understandings and bridge them into more nuanced understandings.

The young students in my classroom were concerned with friendship. They looked for it in each of the stories that were read. In order to leverage this predilection for friends, a teacher should emphasize the hurdles that some friends have to overcome in order to become friends. This emphasis will raise consciousness among students of the difference-based power dynamics that can get in the way of friendship.

Teachers should allow students opportunities and scaffolding necessary to take a critical stance toward literature. In the second reading of *Amazing Grace*, students were better prepared to discuss the issues in the book since they already had one exposure to the ideas within the text. This repeat of the book allowed students to come to the reading prepared to discuss the tense issues in the book. I was also able to provide scaffolding through the modeling of the curiosity about literature for the students. Teachers should
note that during the last read-aloud, the class was able to have the richest discussion about social issues that had occurred so far in the research study.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

Teacher research should look into the benefits of repeated interactive read-alouds. In my second reading of *Amazing Grace*, I found the discussion to be richer than in the first reading. I believe that this highlights the importance of repeated readings of books in a read-aloud session. When students have already been exposed to the ideas in a book once, the discussion can go more in depth. These repeated readings would help discussions during books such as *Voices in the Park*, which may be too complex to fully understand in one reading.

Teachers can see how a teacher could leverage the need for friendship and bonding of students in the primary grades to deepen discussion of critical multicultural issues. For example, teachers could read books that show how characters overcome cultural differences in order to become friends. Through the journey to friendship, many of the cultural differences between the characters can be explored. Students can begin to think about ways that they can make friendships across cultural differences – what problems might arise and how might they solve them?

Research can also explore how students and teachers co-construct thinking in interactive read-alouds. Students in my research began to use the language from the prompts that I gave during the readings. These prompts shaped how the students thought about the text as I read it aloud. This social construction of thinking should be tracked throughout a series of read-alouds to see how student thought changes over time.
References


