Literature Review: The Inclusion of Multicultural Literature in Elementary School Classrooms

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Little diversity, little conflict, little problem. An elementary school counselor in a rural, almost all-White school, was interviewed about multicultural competency training or the integration of a multicultural curriculum and responded, “We don’t really have an issue with that.” When pressed, the counselor explained that given the lack of diversity in the school, there wasn’t much appetite for multicultural education or competency training. Outdated curricula across the country, districts banning diverse books, and misinformed cries against teaching critical race theory in schools suggest this is not unique. Yet this lack of diversity does not reflect the racial makeup of our schools or our country. In K-12 schools, the percentage of ethnically and racially diverse students doubled between 1980 and 2005, from 22% to 44% (Merlin, 2017). In the United States, the U.S. Census Bureau predicted that by 2025 White people will represent just 58% of the population, barely a majority (Merlin, 2017). Schools must adapt their curricula to reflect this change. When White students do not encounter diversity in their daily lives or in school, they rely on secondhand information from the media or the community, often delivered in the form of stereotypes and biases. When students of color see their culture misrepresented or underrepresented in the curricula of their schools, their identity development suffers. The thoughtful inclusion of quality, multicultural children’s literature starting in kindergarten highlights the value of diversity to students of all races, interrupting prejudice, White privilege, and White fragility, weakening the foundations of racism.

Differentiating Racism and Prejudice

Tatum (2017), DiAngelo (2011), Lazar and Offenberg (2011), and Boutte et. al (2011) drew a crucial distinction between racism and prejudice. Tatum (2017) defined racism as “a system of advantage based on race” (p. 87). Racism is not a collection of individual instances of prejudice but is a system that advantages Whites and disadvantages people of color. DiAngelo

(2011) noted that this system of advantage "is not fluid in the U.S.; it does not flow back and forth, one day benefiting whites and another day (or even era) benefiting people of color" (p. 56). What this means for educators is that it is inaccurate to self-reflect: "Am I racist?" Most (or all) would answer "No" and could leave it at that. A more accurate self-reflection would be to ask: "Do I hold prejudices or biases?" and "Does my teaching undermine or strengthen the system of racism in the United States?"

White Privilege and White Fragility

If racism is understood to be a system of advantage, White privilege is to be the beneficiary of those advantages. Researchers found that many Whites see White privilege as a system of advantage to which everyone should have equal access (McIntosh, 1989, and Tatum, 2017). But McIntosh (1989) clarified that there are positive advantages, to which everyone *should* have equal access, and negative advantages, which can only be had at the expense of another. One positive advantage McIntosh (1989) identified was: "I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race" (p. 2). Educators can (and must) ensure that all children can find themselves in the curricula. However, consider this negative advantage: "I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion" (McIntosh, 1989, p. 2). The content of curricula across the country largely reflects this negative advantage.

White people grow up in racial comfort partly because of this oblivion (McIntosh, 1989; DiAngelo, 2011; Tatum, 2017). When Tatum (2017) asked students in a racial identity class to describe their ethnicity, the Black students did not hesitate to say they were Black. But the White students invariably hesitated, or said they were Irish, and one student responded, "I'm just

normal" (p.185). This perception of the dominant culture as the norm is as widespread as it is dangerous. While a person of color is asked to examine their racial identity daily, a White person is rarely, if ever, asked to examine theirs.

DiAngelo (2011) warned that this "insulated environment of racial protection builds White expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress" (p. 54), a condition DiAngelo named White fragility. White people may feel angry, guilty, or afraid, when they experience racial stress, and respond by arguing, silencing, or retreating to their "insulated environment of racial protection." Segregation exacerbates and confirms this "protective pillow" of White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 55).

Interrupting racism, White privilege, and White fragility in elementary school

The curriculum in our schools currently reflects this insulated environment. Whiteness is centered as the norm. The elementary school counselor quoted earlier spoke from this protective pillow of segregation. Yet research shows that membership in this White bubble reinforces White privilege and exacerbates White fragility.

Even among educators who might agree with this idea, there are those who resist it in the early years, claiming that young children are colorblind. However, numerous researchers have debunked this theory. Tatum (2017), Boutte and Muller (2018), and Kim et. al (2016) demonstrated that children begin to develop their gender and ethnic identities as early as 3, and that these impressions begin to gel at the age of 5 or 6. Evidence abounds that through the media, their families, schools, and communities, young children are developing biases and prejudice.

Boutte et. al (2011) explained that "While young children often eagerly play cross-racially and culturally, they have an unstated but nonetheless sophisticated understanding of issues of race and power" (p. 336). Colorblindness is just silence around these issues.

If educators maintain that silence, Lazar and Offenberg (2011) warned that "Within these silent classrooms, the realities and consequences of racism are left unproblematized, contributing to its normalization within society" (p. 276). Educators can break the silence around race, though, by thoughtfully incorporating multicultural children's literature in their classrooms.

Mirrors, windows, and the single story: using multicultural literature in the classroom

Educator Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) used a powerful metaphor to demonstrate literature's ability to effect change. Quality literature, said Bishop (1990), is a mirror and a window, reflecting our cultures, or offering a window into others. In most classrooms in the United States, White children find mirrors, preserving their racial comfort, while children of color peer through windows into the dominant culture, but do not find their own. Not only are books mirrors and windows, but they are also socializers. For children of color who find only windows, Bishop (1990) warned that "when children cannot find themselves in books, or when they see themselves presented only as laughable stereotypes, they learn a powerful lesson about how much they are undervalued in the society of which they are a part" (p. 13). And for those White students who are finding only mirrors, Bishop (1990) said "they will grow up with an exaggerated view of their importance and value in the world, a dangerous ethnocentrism" (p. 15).

Novelist Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie (2009) also spoke of the power of stories, warning of the danger of a "single story," a narrative that reduces or minimizes. If literature tells the story of Blacks as victims and slaves, and Whites as oppressors and slaveholders, then it is a single story, and without highlighting Black resistance or White allies is damaging to the development of Black and White racial identities (Tatum, 2017). Tschida, et. al (2014) used the example of Rosa Parks, often portrayed as the woman on the bus who was too tired to give up her seat. This

single story eradicates Parks' years of activism and arrests prior to this event, and those of her activist community in Montgomery.

By thoughtfully incorporating multidimensional stories that provide windows and mirrors for children across cultures, teachers can disrupt racism, White privilege, and White fragility (Boutte and Muller, 2014; Bishop, 1990; Kim, et al, 2016; MacPhee, 1997; Thomas, 2016).

The Current State of Multicultural Literature Representation

The call for multicultural literature in classrooms is not new (Thomas, 2016; Newvine and Fleming, 2021). Thomas (2016) traced complaints of unfair depictions of African Americans back to the mid-nineteenth century. Increased funding for schools and the civil rights movement in the 1960s heightened urgency of cries for the inclusion of multicultural literature (Thomas, 2016). But even as the numbers of multicultural books are rising, Newvine and Fleming (2021) reported that books *about* Black people almost double those written *by* Black people, and highlighted the paucity of books about Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Arab groups.

Progress may be slow, but schools have acknowledged the need for diverse curricula. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) issued a Resolution on the Need for Diverse Children's and Young Adults Books in 2015, excerpted here:

> The absence of human, cultural, linguistic, and family diversity in children's and young adult literature attests to the growing disparity and inequity in the publishing history in the United States. Stories matter. (Thomas, 2016, p. 116).

Engaging with multicultural literature through read-alouds

How do we reconcile the NCTE's acknowledgement of the need for more multicultural literature with the statistics demonstrating a clear lack? Part of the hesitancy to incorporate multicultural literature in curricula stems from teachers' reluctance to dive too deeply into issues

of racism. Their reluctance is not unfounded, as Lazar and Offenberg (2011) observed: "When children talk about race…there is indeed a risk that children will speak what is often unspoken" (p. 279). Children may say something hurtful in the classroom or may bring home a conversation that their parents find offensive, who then may turn to the administration. Teachers, Lazar and Offenberg (2011) acknowledged, carry a tremendous burden.

One way for teachers to provide the necessary scaffolding around difficult concepts like race is through multicultural read-alouds (Lazar and Offenberg, 2011; Boutte et. al, 2011; Lennox, 2013; Hoffman, 2011; Evans, 2010). By reading stories aloud, multiculturally competent teachers can work together with their students to find meaning, and can break the cycle of silence around race, addressing difficult concepts as they arise.

In addition to the benefits of teacher scaffolding around racial concepts, reading as a social process increases the possibility for understanding and cognitive growth (Eeds and Wells, 1989; Kim et. al, 2016). According to Vygotsky, the processes necessary for learning "are *only* able to develop when children are interacting with people in their environment and in cooperation with their peers" (Eeds and Wells, 1989, p. 6).

Children's understanding of their world (made stronger through peer and teacher interaction) informs their reading, and their reading (made stronger through peer and teacher interaction) informs their understanding of the world. A read-aloud, then, provides an ideal environment for growth and learning.

Multicultural read-alouds in diverse classrooms

Several studies demonstrated the effectiveness of the read-aloud in a diverse classroom. Boutte et. al (2011) observed a bilingual second-grade classroom reading group, in which the teacher read aloud fiction and nonfiction picture books. Transcripts and drawings showed that

children were indeed race-conscious and portrayed how the teacher thoughtfully worked through racial issues with the children. Analysis of student artifacts and transcripts showed a marked improvement in the second graders' comprehension of race and racism.

DeNicolo and Franquiz (2006) studied read-aloud groups in a bilingual, mixed reading-level fourth-grade classroom, focusing on the conversations that sprang up after a critical encounter, or "the specific moments in reading that disrupt the traditional social pattern of talk" (p. 157). The critical encounter in this study occurred when the group came across a racial slur in the book. The reader asked, "do I have to say it?" (p. 164). Until this moment the students had been taking turns sharing details about characters and events. But after the encounter transcripts revealed a shift in the conversation, and all members became actively engaged in a discussion about race. DeNicolo and Franquiz (2006) found that students of every reading ability were sharing equally, engaged in "grand conversations" instead of "gentle inquisitions," a turn of phrase borrowed from Eads & Wells (1989). DeNicolo and Franquiz (2006) concluded that "elementary bilingual students were able to think critically about the imprint of racism on children their age" (p. 168).

Kesler, et. al (2020) conducted interactive, social justice-themed read-alouds in a third-grade classroom. The sessions were videorecorded, and analyzed for moments before, during, and after the reading that showed ways that students and teachers were constructing meaning. Transcripts captured students' use of "exploratory talk … using words such as *maybe*, asking questions, taking a wondering stance, and backing claims with evidence using *because*" (p. 218). Kesler, et. al (2020) concluded that "students were able to embody and infer the perspectives of characters in situations far beyond their own limited experiences, thereby realizing the complexity of advocacy toward social justice" (p. 220).

Evans (2011) studied the use of the multicultural read-aloud in a diverse fourth-grade classroom, and through qualitative analysis of transcripts and journals showed that students increased their understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of their own cultures and others, and demonstrated increased awareness of bias and prejudice.

Multicultural read-alouds in monocultural or White classrooms

Fewer studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of multicultural read-alouds in White or monocultural classrooms. Kim, et. al (2016) studied a read-aloud of books about African Americans in a monocultural, affluent kindergarten classroom in South Korea. Early discussions and drawings revealed children's stereotypes and biases toward African Americans: they were poor, didn't wear clothes, and needed help. Kim, et. al (2016) noticed these stereotypes were not based on attributes children would typically notice (different skin colors, facial features), but rather, seemed to be higher-level concepts, and therefore likely acquired from parents or the media. As the study progressed, qualitative and quantitative analysis of transcripts of classes, interviews, and student artifacts revealed more comfort using racial language, and a broader understanding of African Americans – a move away from the single story of poverty.

MacPhee (1997), an educator in an all-White school, implemented the multicultural read-aloud to interrupt the ethnic encapsulation she observed in her classrooms. Through qualitative analysis of transcripts and artifacts such as student drawings, MacPhee found an increase in students' empathy and understanding of discrimination, noting that student responses "showed a sensitivity for the feelings and actions of groups they seldom interact with or even think about" (p. 39).

Teacher training and multicultural competency

These studies demonstrated that multicultural read-alouds can provide students with mirrors and windows and can diffuse the single story, White privilege, and White fragility. The effectiveness of the read-aloud, however, rests almost solely on the teacher.

Teachers need a certain level of skill to conduct an effective read-aloud. Lennox (2013) defined an interactive read-aloud as a "context in which a teacher genuinely shares, not abandons, authority with the children" (p. 382). To successfully share authority, teacher comments, responses to students, and questions are of tantamount importance. If not done well, a read-aloud can look more like an inquisition, where the teacher asks questions and children try to answer (Eeds and Wells, 1989). Hoffman (2011) referred to this model as IRE (teacher initiation, student response, teacher evaluation), and found it insufficient to finding meaning. Hoffman (2011) observed that the effective teacher used the read-aloud to model comprehension strategies, be responsive, encourage, clarify, and scaffold children as teacher and students co-constructed meaning.

In addition to mastering the necessary skills to engage children in thoughtful discussion and meaning-making, teachers also must be multiculturally competent. Lazar & Offenberg (2011) observed that "Thoughtful discussions about multicultural literature are compromised if teachers either ignore or gloss over controversial topics such as racism" (p. 276). At the root of this avoidance may be caution or fear around the issue, as referenced earlier, but it also may spring "not from their unwillingness, but rather from unfamiliarity with the knowledge base and available resources" (Boutte et. al, 2011, p. 335). Many White teachers, perhaps like the students they teach, have little experience with people of other racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Demonstrating this point, Lazar and Offenberg (2011) studied preservice teachers who used multicultural read-alouds in their practicums and found that the teachers tended to focus on story characters and plot lines, while fewer focused on the discrimination the characters experienced. Even fewer named Whites as those committing the racist acts. The teachers used "'White talk'—language that insulates Whites from the culpability of racism'" (Lazar and Offenberg, 2011, p. 293). This talk reveals a misconception of racism and reinforces White privilege and White fragility. Boutte et. al (2011) found that "The reality that the vast majority of educators do not *intentionally* commit acts of racism does not negate the fact that *anybody* can contribute to institutional racism unless efforts are taken to avoid doing so" (p. 335).

Phrased another way, Newvine and Fleming (2021), referencing Bishop's mirrors and windows metaphor, warned that windows can be voyeuristic and othering. If conducted by a teacher who lacks multicultural competency, a read-aloud "can lead to bigger walls and stronger animosity" (Newvine and Fleming, 2021, p. 14).

Multicultural read-alouds straddle the academic and the socioemotional domains, and as such, a literacy teacher and a school counselor trained in multicultural competency could effectively collaborate to implement multicultural read-alouds in schools as part of the regular curriculum (Merlin, 2017).

Limitations and need for further study

Short-term studies of multicultural read-alouds are efficient and help build the body of evidence, but longer-term studies are needed that demonstrate measurable results in the academic, socioemotional, and career domains. It would be beneficial to gauge the effectiveness of a regularly occurring multicultural read-aloud as students move through elementary school.

Additionally, the multicultural read-aloud is just a small slice of what is needed for real change to occur. Just as it's insufficient to study African American history for a week or so in the month of February, so too is it insufficient to say: okay, now we will talk about race for 40 minutes. Conversations around race and diversity must be woven into every facet of learning.

The primary focus of this paper was also narrow: using the multicultural read-aloud to counter racism in largely White schools. But the inclusion of multicultural literature is of tantamount importance for the millions of students of color who can't find themselves in the curricula of our schools–or worse–who find inaccuracies, stereotypes, and caricatures of their cultures. Day in and day out these students are learning their value in society (or lack thereof) through books that center on the White experience, taught by predominantly White teachers, in schools where the administration is mostly White.

Finally, while many school districts acknowledge the need for multicultural education, some schools are moving in the opposite direction, banning books with messages of diversity. Change, though, is possible. Newvine and Fleming (2021) eloquently observed:

> The literary canon is only the canon because someone decided to continue to read and teach that text day-after-day and year-after-year…. If we, as educators, decided to teach texts which center the narratives of historically marginalized people day-after-day and year-after-year, maybe we could cannon the canon. (p. 23).

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