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Creating Elementary-Aged Agents of Change: The Impact of Civil Rights-Themed Literature

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Abstract

This chapter focused on the notion of implementing Civil Rights-themed literature with elementary-aged students through interactive read alouds. With traditional pre-packaged scripted curriculum programs, teachers are challenged with implementing additional literature and utilizing resources to promote an expansive variety of learning experiences. Sample texts and interactive activities were addressed and provided for teachers to use as an initial starting point for introducing Civil Rights-themed literature in their classrooms. Lastly, implications for teacher professional development were addressed in an effort to provide teachers and teacher candidates with a space to explore a variety of authentic multicultural children’s literature.

Keywords: *multicultural children’s literature, Civil Rights Movement, interactive read alouds*

Literature in the Classroom

The term “children’s literature” is used to describe a group of children and young adult texts produced to inform and entertain within many genres. In addition to the different genres, such as fantasy, historical fiction, biography, poetry, and multicultural literature, there are also subgroups that fall under each genre. Teachers and students may select from the large quantities

and various genres of quality children’s literature that are available to them. It is important that teachers introduce specific, culturally relevant literature pieces during classroom instruction. For the purpose of this work, a specific selection of multicultural children’s literature that focuses on historically underrepresented people of color and their experiences during the Civil Rights Movement in American history was reviewed. This review

was conducted in an effort to encourage teachers to implement literature in their classrooms and approach critical conversations with students moving towards creating agents of change in elementary classrooms. This group of literature has been coined as *Movement-Oriented Civil Rights-Themed Multicultural Children's Literature* (MO-CRiTlit).

Children's literature is an essential resource for classroom teachers to use not only to introduce different genres to students, but also to facilitate learning through interactive read alouds. The incorporation of a variety of children's literature enables children to learn about themselves as well as others. Too often, teachers use children's literature as a platform to simply celebrate holidays. Introducing literature during certain holidays can add value to a child's education; however, it does not fully encompass the totality of learning about the holiday or tradition without the cultural teachings and understanding (Dietrich & Ralph, 1995). Understanding the benefits of interactive read alouds helps teachers as they plan themes around the topics and class content.

Teachers may be asked to use prepackaged or scripted curricula. Scripted curriculum rarely interests children, especially diverse students who may not relate to literature read in the classroom, and must be supplemented with authentic texts. A lack of relevance often leads to a lack of motivation to learn from this type of curriculum (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004). However, when children read books that are selected based on their interests and that are developmentally appropriate, there is a greater chance that they will build motivation to read and continue to develop their literacy skills. For example, issues of race, class, and language, among other social justice concerns, have been and continue to be prevalent in the lives of students of color in U.S. schools (Horsford, 2011, 2014; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Palos, 2011).

With these issues in mind, teacher educators have developed repertoires of practice to support pre-service teachers' engagement in critical literacy pedagogical practices in teaching about social justice concerns (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Adams et al., 2010; Milner, 2010). Given this research behind the use of children's literature and the need for further implementation in schools, this chapter seeks to provide teacher educators, in-service teachers, and teacher candidates recommended texts and activities that can be used to help prepare teachers to implement Civil Rights-themed literature, or MO-CRiTlit, in elementary classrooms to promote social action with young children. When literature is introduced in the classroom setting, it provides opportunity for culturally responsive pedagogy, such that the children develop a connection to literature and increase their motivation to read. The connection to literature and motivation can benefit the teacher, the classroom culture, and the student's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Civil Rights-Themed Literature

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2014), the American Civil Rights Movement is the least taught topic in American history. Moreover, many states view the teaching of the Civil Rights Movement as a regional matter or only for children of color. As a result, the Civil Rights Movement is typically not central to mainstream PK-12 history curriculum.

Additionally, popular narratives used to teach about the Civil Rights Movement and leaders in traditional schooling illustrate a small group of leaders as being the activists (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014). However, this does not represent the entire truth; there were many other people who advocated for civil rights and equality. It is crucial that there is a space for teachers and teacher candidates to learn about authentic Civil Rights-themed literature and recognize the "how to" when it comes to implementing supplemental literature.

In the last twenty years, there has been an increase in the availability of multicultural children's literature that meets the definition of Civil Rights-themed multicultural literature. This increase in availability has provided teachers with a pool of literature from which to select for use in classrooms. It is vital that teachers are mindful in the selection of multicultural children's literature and ensure that its content is (a) factually and otherwise accurate, and (b) does not promote stereotypes or superficial representations of historically underrepresented people of color (Kohl, 1993). For example, consider the historical teaching of civil rights activist Rosa Parks, a woman known by children learning about the Civil Rights movement. The story of Rosa Parks has suggested that by refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a White man, she instigated the boycott of the Montgomery Bus Line. However, organizing in advance for social justice is what led to the historical events. Civil Rights-themed children's literature portrays two different accounts to this event: (1) Rosa as being a tired elderly woman with a desire to be seated, and (2) Rosa as an activist who demanded a seat on the bus for equal rights.

With this in mind, teaching through a critical literacy lens increases awareness and acknowledges the structures of power relations in society. Freire and Macedo (1987) argued that true literacy is reflected in the ability to read "the word *and* the world" (p. 8). From this idea, the notion of *critical* literacy emerges. A critical literacy framework encourages teachers to reconsider literacy instruction as "problem posing" education, where the relationships of hegemony, power, and literacy are questioned at the same time that literacy skills are taught and learned (Freire, 1973).

When children engage with this type of literature, they see how groups of people organized and came together to create change. This idea of social action is important for young people today to gain a better understanding as

they, too, can be agents of change through social action. Ultimately, teaching through a critical literacy framework will empower children to bring about transformational change.

Examples and Implementation

Access to Civil Rights-themed children's literature has increased in the last twenty years (Menkart, Murray, & View, 2004). With the increased access and opportunity to explore children's literature, it is vital that teachers offer a variety of literature. Through interactive read alouds, teachers can facilitate learning and critical conversations that will increase student knowledge while also making connections to the text. The following texts are examples of Civil Rights-themed literature and interactive activities designed to be used with students to introduce topics that are generally not found in the prepackaged scripted curriculum (see Table 1).

Wangari's Trees of Peace (Winter, 2008). Growing up in Kenya, Wangari enjoyed the many trees that made her home beautiful. However, after being away for a period of time and returning home, she found forests of trees destroyed and cut down. Wangari was determined to make a change and do something to help her country, so she started by planting nine seedlings in her backyard. Before she knew it, Wangari had big plans as her project grew and grew. A true story, this is an example of a young woman who was passionate, committed, and determined to create change. There are other texts that share the story and work of Wangari Maathai, including *Seeds of Change* (Johnson, 2010) and *Mama Miti* (Napoli, 2010).

Teachers can use the texts independently or as a unit when working with students. Additionally, interactive activities include having students identify how they can make a change in their community. This activity could be approached from different aspects. For example, students could create a collage of item

Table 1

Examples of Civil Rights-Themed Literature

Title	Author	Themes
<i>The Story of Ruby Bridges</i>	Robert Coles	Set in the 1960s, the true story of a young Black girl attending an all-White school.
<i>Talkin' About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman</i>	Nikki Grimes	Set in the early 1900s, this story shows the obstacles Elizabeth Coleman faced to become the first female African American pilot.
<i>Seeds of Change: Wangari's Gift to the World</i>	Jen Cullerton Johnson	Set in Kenya, the story follows a young girl who, educated in America, went back to Kenya to help save the land, one tree at a time.
<i>Giant Steps to Change the World</i>	Spike Lee and Tonya Lewis Lee	This story follows examples of people in history who have taken big steps of activism.
<i>Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya</i>	Donna Jo Napoli	Set in 1977, the story follows Mama Miti who founded the Green Belt Movement to fight environmental degradation.
<i>Separate is never equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation</i>	Duncan Tonatiuh	Set in 1944, this story shows the struggle of a Mexican born family for equality in California.
<i>Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa</i>	Jeanette Winter	Set in Kenya, the story follows Wangari and her decision to try to save the trees.

that they find in print to identify their own vision board of things they would like to change. Students could also create a letter to a local politician describing an idea that would make their community a better place to live. Throughout the year, teachers should also guide students in making connections between life events and finding ways to change through discussions and sharing ideas. Working through interactive activities such as these provides students with opportunities to see how they have the ability to advocate for and create change.

Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation (Tonatiuh, 2014). The story of Sylvia Mendez and her family moving to California during the 1940's proved to be a difficult transition for her as she learned that her neighborhood was not the most welcoming place. Sylvia and her brother had to attend the "Mexican" school, which was a run down, dirty place where not even the teachers wanted to be. Other children got to attend the other school, where the White children learn. The Mendez

family did not approve of the segregation and filed a lawsuit to desegregate schools in California. This text uses actual legal terms, which are explained for young children to understand the context of the story.

The text *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles, 2010) tells a similar story of a young Ruby Bridges who was the first African American child to attend a New Orleans elementary school. Ruby Bridges went to school every day surrounded by marshals who kept her from the mob of angry White protestors. Ruby often sat in a classroom alone because the community did not want their children attending a desegregated school. The text demonstrates Ruby's courage in facing a difficult situation and her tenacity to look for the positive of the situation.

Although these two stories took place in two different geographic locations and different time periods, both texts provide readers with a context of school segregation. Interactive activities for these two texts could include writing about a time when someone had to take a stand for what was right or writing a letter to Sylvia or Ruby that addresses their bravery as young children. Activities such as these will help students gain a better perspective of social action and affirm their own actions of having the ability to take a stand.

Talkin' About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman (Grimes, 2002). Affectionately known in the story as Bessie, Elizabeth Coleman grew up being told what she could and could not do as a young girl. At the age of 11, Bessie was determined to become the first African American female pilot. Through a strong faith and determination, Bessie overcame many obstacles and accomplished her goal. This text speaks to issues of gender discrimination, poverty, and racism.

Another similar text is *Giant Steps to Change the World* (Lee & Lee, 2011). Lee and Lee introduced a variety of people who created

change by taking steps to overcome slights and make a difference. The book uses examples from attempting to change the poverty in a neighborhood to working to make change by becoming President. The topics apply to society today and offer significant insights into today's modern day civil rights issues.

Media influences children and their understanding of what society believes to be acceptable. Teachers are faced with students questioning topics, such as gender equality. An interactive activity associated with these two texts include having students work in pairs to create a Venn diagram that represents their individual unique characteristics and attributes that are similar between the two of them. This type of activity helps students appreciate one another and establishes a connection between students, the text, and the societal norms. Through this connection, young children become informed of societal and cultural differences and have the ability to make their own decisions and understanding of the world around them.

Conclusion

Creating a welcoming and safe space for learning is a major component of multicultural education. Supplementing the curriculum in schools can be difficult in the beginning because of the demands set by school leaders. However, it is imperative that teachers create spaces for children to engage with Civil Rights-themed literature. By doing so, teachers build classroom cultures that support student achievement and influence their motivation to read, think, and act. Introducing these topics provides a multicultural perspective across traditional schooling practices and ensures a more equitable education for all children, including those who face institutionalized racial stigmas (Piper, 2017). This approach openly addresses issues of power structures and racism in schools and helps ensure that all students receive an equitable education.

In closing, teachers and teacher candidates must prepare for possible questions and critical conversations around topics introduced in children's literature. Professional development to assist teachers with designing assignments where students begin to question their own social settings, facilitating discussions to push understanding, and exploring a variety of literature that address inequality (e.g., race, gender, class) will help teachers gain the confidence needed to address difficult topics.

While the standards-based curriculum is often the foundation for literacy education in

traditional public schools, children's literature must be used to connect students to historical and real-world events. By employing pedagogical practices that promote interactions with literature, teachers can increase students' awareness and appreciation for literature, motivation to read, and agency. When students relate their own experiences to the experiences of others and reflect, plan, and act in ways that can change through social action, they have a greater potential to perform better socially and academically (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Nieto, 2010a, 2010b).

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