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Considering Different Perspectives in Children's Literature: An Inquiry Approach that Promotes Civic Learning

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"When are we going to do social justice [read aloud time] again? I have something to say." –An enthusiastic second grader

Every Friday afternoon, Olivia implemented what she called "social justice read-aloud time" in her second grade classroom. She chose to focus on identity and race as her topic, and selected trade books that explicitly address these issues. For example, over the course of several months, she read aloud, *Let's Talk about Race*, by Julius Lester, which describes race as one of many special aspects of identity; *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight* by Duncan Tonatiuh, which details the struggle to end school segregation in California; and *Happy to be Nappy* by bell hooks, which celebrates the beauty of Black hair.[1] During the read-alouds, she paused to ask questions about the narrative that related to social power and privilege, including, "Why is it like this?" "Who benefits from it being like this?" "Whose voice is missing? "Is this fair?"" Class discussions around these books were consistently lively, as students shared their insights and questions about race, segregation, identity, and fairness. Olivia transcribed student comments and added them to the classroom's audit trail, a visual trail of learning that grew along the wall.[2] Students appreciated seeing their comments posted, as the opening (above) demonstrates.

Olivia did not consider the weekly "social justice read aloud time" to be part of a specific social studies or literacy curriculum. That said, the read alouds certainly strengthened literacy skills, such as comprehension, synthesis, critical thinking, and text analysis. It also aligned with the aim of elementary social studies as stated by NCSS to "enable students to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world."[3] Olivia, who is African American, chose her read alouds because their content was meaningful in the lives of young people today. Her students responded with interest, but Olivia was met with resistance by one student's parents in the Missouri college town where she taught.

A Conflict about What Should be Taught

Upon learning about a classroom activity that focused on race and identity, the two parents asked the principal whether their daughter could be transferred to a different second grade classroom. They stated that their daughter "doesn't see color" and should be focusing on reading and math, not race and identity. Olivia invited the parents, who were white, to discuss their concerns with her. She wanted the chance to listen to them, and then to explain her curricular focus on race during this weekly classroom time, to explain that the children were engaged and learning about empathy, perspective, and the beauty of differences. Education in her classroom went beyond reading and math and toward equity and justice. The parents, however, refused to meet with Olivia. Instead of offering support, her principal simply instructed her to "take care of it." With much disappointment, she granted the family's request that their child sit in the hallway with an iPad during social justice read-aloud time.[4] Olivia did not allow the complaint to interrupt her pedagogical goals, she continued reading books about race on Friday afternoons. Unfortunately, in this scenario, one child was left out.

Ideally, all teachers would be supported and feel confident about holding a social justice read aloud time with all students present. As Olivia experienced, however, there can be challenges to using such teaching methods. Olivia was the only teacher in her elementary school intentionally using books in the classroom about social topics in order to explore privilege and oppression and to move toward social action. Teachers do not always feel prepared or willing to bring social justice topics (e.g., involving racial justice), into the elementary school classroom.[5] Some teachers are fearful of offending parents or principals, or of raising unwarranted fears or doubts in their

young students, Further, some schools mandate adopted literacy curricula, limiting the teaching time and text choice teachers have. We argue, however, that even within those circumstances, teachers can still look for opportunities for civically focused read-aloud sessions.

Options for Children's Literature and Ways to Teach

In the following sections, we model how to teach civic dispositions using popular trade books that do not have an obvious connection to critical themes (e.g., power, privilege, identity). In doing so, we create opportunities to teach civic dispositions within a school environment that may forbid some books (such as those listed above) as "too controversial"—or that might accept lessons that gradually introduce students (and their parents) to a topic that may be controversial. We strongly believe all elementary students need civic learning experiences that "develop [their] ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world."[6]

While focusing on the read aloud as an opportunity for civic learning, we describe how the pedagogical frameworks of critical literacy and social studies can align. We offer an example Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint using a book series as an entry point for critical literacy practices and rich civic learning. We use the David book series by David Shannon, published by ThriftBooks, which includes *No, David!, David Goes to School*, and several other titles.

Read Alouds: Critical Literacy Entry Points

Despite shifting pedagogical trends, elementary students will still likely be found sitting together on the carpet, listening to their teacher read a story, as could be seen 20 or 30 years ago. Instructional time for social studies instruction, on the other hand, has been reduced.[7] Due to this curricular squeeze, teachers tend to integrate social studies themes and concepts into language arts instruction,[8] In fact, the new academic standards for social studies in Kentucky explicitly make connections to the reading and writing standards, encouraging opportunities for interdisciplinary learning.[9]

Critical literacy is a pedagogical framework that can be used to incorporate social studies content in read alouds. Tenets of critical literacy include: interrupting the status quo (pausing to ask whether the usual way of doing things devalues any category of human being), interrogating multiple perspectives (looking at an event or social problem from the point of view of all who are present), bringing social justice topics into the classroom (discussing issues of race, gender, disability, or place of family origin), and advocating for social action (petitioning and advocating).[10] Critical literacy is built around the idea that language, literacy, and power are intertwined.[11] Lessons using this framework challenge students to analyze texts of all kinds (i.e., videos, advertisements, images, novels, and textbooks) and to consider the authors' purpose. Ultimately, students work to understand current texts, redesign texts, and even write new texts in more equitable ways.

Thoughtfully planned read alouds can be springboards for more in-depth inquiries. For example, educators have suggested reading text sets about Muslim people and culture; asking questions that create space for students to share their own immigration and refugee experiences; and allowing for multimodal responses to the books.[12] Thus, students can gain empathy and a more nuanced understanding of people with experiences different from their own, while also affirming their own experiences and family origins.

Students can use books to make sense of the world around them. There is a growing collection of children's literature that explicitly addresses social justice topics, and books that challenge dominant perspectives and highlight typically silenced voices are readily available.[13] What we argue, however, is that critical literacy practices can be used in all texts. Bringing a critical lens to "standard" elementary read alouds promotes the development of students' civic dispositions and can lead to informed action.[14]

Finding Opportunities for Civic Learning

School districts often adopt literacy curricula that limit teachers' choice of books that might be used in the classroom. For example, in Kentucky, many local classrooms must implement Wonders, a pre-K-6 literacy curriculum by McGraw Hill. Pre-packaged lessons include several texts, both fiction and non-fiction, for students to read throughout the year. Texts are often aligned by theme, and come with instructional guidance, including specific objectives, questions to ask during the read aloud, and examples of expected student responses. These resources offer helpful tools to teachers, but also have the potential to minimize creativity and stifle choice – two significant deterrents to student engagement.[15] Further, some of the literacy curricula produced by prominent educational publishers, such as Pearson Education, have portrayed minority characters in incomplete and unfair ways.[16] Mandated curricula and limited social studies instruction time requires teachers to be creative and design opportunities for student-centered civic learning. This is why the read aloud is key.

Bridging Books and Civics through Inquiry

Reflecting a critical theory worldview, we created a sample social studies inquiry focused on developing students' critical understandings and informing their social practices through read alouds. The inquiry structure centers student experiences and connects learning to their lives, helping students apply reading experiences to the real world. By using critical literacy to find the text's civic concept, then focusing reading and tasks around that idea, teachers can create and develop space in the elementary curriculum for critical literacy practices through social studies (**Figure 1**). Using the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint to structure student work,[17] we created a series

of questions and tasks around the well-known trade books by David Shannon, *No, David; David Goes to School; David Gets in Trouble; and Grow Up, David!*

Why Use the *David Series?*

Although the *David* series might be unlikely to appear on a list of civic education trade books, they are relevant for two primary reasons: (1) to illustrate how implicit civic themes can be made explicit through instructional scaffolds, notably inquiry-based learning; and (2) to present civic themes that are related to listening and valuing perspectives, two civic dispositions we believe are particularly needed by today's young people. These themes provide a pathway for critical practices, where students not only learn to find value in their own experiences, but also to recognize, validate, and encourage different voices.[18]

In the *David* books, the title character is repeatedly admonished for misbehaving. Though he sometimes misbehaves with zeal, at other times he unintentionally causes mischief. Centering an inquiry around these books creates an opportunity for perspective-taking, as students need to consider the reasons for everyone's actions. Even if David is doing something wrong, interrogating different perspectives unearths one that is key (David's voice), but his perspective is not the first to be revealed. Viewing an event from different perspectives helps students critically reflect upon what people do and why they may do it.

To answer the compelling question—"Why should we listen to different stories?"—students proceed through three supporting questions and tasks in order to construct an argument. By coupling the compelling question with the *David* book series, students challenge dominant narratives and consider whose voices are privileged (i.e., deemed worthy by other characters in the story), and whose are missing. The inquiry culminates in an opportunity for students to apply their learning by taking informed action in their own social environment. They advocate that the voice of each student be heard in their classroom. **Figure 2: Primary Elementary Inquiry,** summarizes the lesson.

Illuminating Civic Themes to Interrupt the Status Quo

What are David's intentions in the story? In the initial books in the series, the author does not share that information. What David himself is thinking and feeling is a mystery. For example, in *No David*, the main character is reprimanded for splashing too much water while playing in the bathtub. Making a mess is a common reason for children to hear the word, "No." However, since we don't hear David's voice at all in the narrative, the reader doesn't know if he made the mess on accident or on purpose. Likewise, in *David Gets in Trouble*, he is shown having his mouth washed out with soap for repeating something that "Daddy says." The reader wonders, "Why did David say that word?" "Did he know it was bad?" By providing time in the lesson for students to examine various perspectives, they can feel more comfortable as they verbalize their own experiences, reflect upon their own perceptions, and establish themselves as a valuable participant in society.[19]

Figure 1: **Comparing the *C3 Framework*, Critical Literacy, and Our Inquiry**

C3 Framework Indicator (NCSS, 2013, 2014)	**Critical Literacy Tenets** (Lewison, Flint, & van Sluys, 2002)	**Our Inquiry Design Model Blueprint**
D2.Civ.10.K-2. Compare their own point of view with others' perspectives.	Interrogate multiple perspectives	Question sequence helps students assess different perspectives, preparing them for the compelling question: Why should we listen to different stories?
D2.Civ.8.K-2. Describe democratic principles such as equality, fairness, and respect for legitimate authority and rules.	Interrupt the status quo	The tasks ask students to assess perspectives in order to challenge dominant narratives.
D2.Civ.7.K-2. Apply civic virtues when participating in school settings.	Focus on sociopolitical issues to understand how power relationships shape civic actions.	The inquiry highlights civic virtues—listening and valuing perspectives—preparing students to engage in democratic processes.
D4.8.K-2. Use listening, consensus-building, and voting procedures to decide on, and take action in, their classrooms.	Taking action and promoting social justice	Opportunity to take informed action by assessing and building upon school practices towards a more equitable and inclusive space.

Figure 2. **Primary Elementary Inquiry**

Why should we listen to different stories?	
Standards and Content	**D2.Civ.10.K-2**. Compare their own point of view with others' perspectives. **D2.Civ.8.K-2**. Describe democratic principles such as equality, fairness, and respect for legitimate authority and rules.
Staging the Compelling Question	Have a class discussion about when people had different perspectives. What happened? How did different individuals see the situation differently? What were the different sides of the story? What resulted? What could have been done differently?

Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
Who tells the story?	Whose voice is missing?	Why do people see things differently?
Formative Performance Task	**Formative Performance Task**	**Formative Performance Task**
List or draw examples of David's actions in a two-panel graphic organizer.	Draw or describe actions from David's perspective.	Write claims with evidence about why people see things differently.
Featured Sources	**Featured Sources**	**Featured Sources**
Teachers can use one or all of the featured sources. **Source A**: *No David!* **Source B**: *David Goes to School* **Source C**: *Grow Up, David!*	**Source A**: *David Gets in Trouble*	Featured Sources from Supporting Questions 1–2.

Summative Performance Task	**ARGUMENT** Why should we listen to different stories? Construct an argument (e.g., sentences, picture) that answers the compelling question.
	EXTENSION Draw a picture that illustrates how people have different stories and perspectives about events.
Taking Informed Action	**UNDERSTAND** Review the classroom rules for talking and listening to one another. **ASSESS** Have a class discussion where students evaluate possible revisions that include everyone's voice in different situations (e.g., sharing thoughts during read alouds, procedures for conflict) **ACT** Establish a classroom routine or classroom statement that supports community building, ensuring all voices are heard.

Staging the Inquiry

To prepare students to engage in an inquiry in which they discuss multiple perspectives, the staging exercise has teachers draw on students' existing knowledge. Teachers can ask students to tell about an event they remember, a moment when people had different perspectives about the event. Why did some people see it differently? What makes their view different? Why do people like different things or have different opinions? Do we always have to agree with one another? No matter the focus of students' conversations, teachers should cue students' attention to the question of why multiple perspectives exist.

Interrogating Multiple Perspectives through Questions

The compelling question for the inquiry—"Why should we listen to different stories?"—centers the critical literacy practice of "interrogating multiple perspectives." The inquiry's supporting questions help students parse out the different stories being told in the books, considering whose voices are heard, whose are not, and what thoughts or motivations may be behind the actions of the characters. The supporting questions scaffold students' work and are complemented by formative performance tasks. This design builds students' understandings of the different perspectives woven throughout the David books series.

Who Tells the Story?

The first supporting question—"Who tells the story?"—invites students to reflect upon the storyteller in *No David*, *David Goes to School*, or *Grow Up, David*. Though the class can make inferences about David's point of view, this question has students focus initially on the perspectives of different characters:

What David Did, and How People Perceived It

HANDOUT

Your Name: ______________________________

1. Draw a picture on the back of this sheet of something David did that upset other people as described in the book *No David*.
2. In this book, who gets to tell the story about what happened?
3. How did this character feel about what happened?
4. Whose voice is missing in this book? (Who else was there?)
5. Now read a second book about the same event, *David Gets in Trouble*. How do you think David felt about what happened?
6. Why do you think David did this? (It is okay to guess.)
7. What could David say to other characters in the story about what happened?

a parent, a teacher, and a sibling. Using a graphic organizer, students write about and draw David's actions, as described by the narrator (**Handout**, on this page).

Whose Voice is Missing?

Next, the class should read *David Gets in Trouble*. This book shares, for the first time, David's perspective of the same event. and helps answer the second supporting question—"Whose voice is missing?" Once students have considered David's point of view, they reread the book from the previous lesson and revisit the graphic organizer, as they are now able to add David's perspective to it. This comparison does not necessarily have students determine one person as being right or wrong, but rather has them think deeply about how different stories can emerge from the same event.

Why Do People See Things Differently?

The third supporting question builds upon students' analysis to consider why people hold different perspectives. To answer the supporting question—"Why do people see things differently?"—students will use their previous formative performance tasks to write evidence-based claims, using sentence starters. Students use evidence from the story and make inferences about the thoughts and emotions of different characters (David, the teacher, a parent, or a sibling), that is, the reasons behind different perspectives. Teachers can begin to have students consider why it is useful to hear from different sides, which prepares them for the summative performance task.

Constructing Arguments

Students' arguments will likely vary, but they should all reflect the concept that people have different perspectives, or "stories" about events, based on each person's own understandings and life experiences. Invite students to see past David's observable actions (and the disapproving words of a teacher, parent, or sibling) to consider motivations behind different perspectives. For example,

David often gets into trouble by accident, rather than by intent (i.e., purposefully causing mischief). Likewise, the parent and teacher want David to be safe and responsible, rather than just wanting to criticize him. Students' arguments can show how different stories present different views. Rather than condemning or supporting any one character's behavior or point of view, this inquiry's summative assessment supports the importance of validating and understanding all perspectives, even though mistakes can be made and misunderstandings can happen.

Taking Informed Action

After completing the formative and summative performance tasks, students are ready to apply their critical understandings in a civic learning exercise. Using the IDM structure for "taking informed action," this exercise has three main components: understand, assess, and act. Action can take many forms. While larger actions such as protesting or writing petitions to effect change are certainly valuable civic practices, we want to highlight the smaller ways one can meaningfully take civic action in the classroom. When young children gain experience acting within their local settings (i.e., the classroom), they build their foundation of civic dispositions, as well as knowledge and skills about how to engage in a meaningful way in a civic setting. This classroom practice helps students get ready for full civic participation in the wider community.

To understand how the inquiry's content applies to the real world, students review rules (or guidance statements) posted in a classroom or school lunchroom that deal with listening to one another as we talk. Students can hold a class discussion analyzing these rules. Is the concept "listen carefully to others" included as a rule or suggested behavior? As a collective action, the class can establish a routine or statement that supports community-building and ensures that all voices are heard. For example, the class could set up procedures for sharing thoughts during read alouds, or for addressing a conflict between classmates. Through such a discussion, students directly connect the inquiry's social justice theme to a civic action, creating space for meaningful, student-centered civic learning.

Conclusion

The read aloud is a curricular space with the potential for social studies learning by engaging in critical literacy practices. This interdisciplinary connection provides opportunities for meaningful student experiences. The erosion of elementary classroom time for social studies requires teachers to be creative, finding ways to teach critical practices (such as seeing an event from multiple perspectives) that promote civic learning. In this article, we described how critical literacy can support social studies inquiry and presented an example of bringing these practices to life using a nontraditional book series. We hope that this work helps teachers consider how they create civic spaces through reconceptualizing what they read with students.

Notes

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