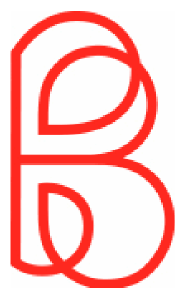

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Angry Like Me

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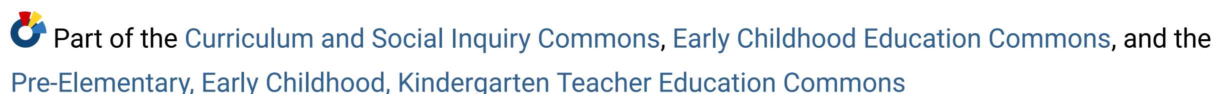

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Angry Like Me

Catherine-Laura Dunnington and Shoshana Magnet

> ***A young preschool student, his hands sticky from a classroom breakfast of whole wheat pancakes and blueberries, was sitting on my lap, wiggling from right to left on my thighbone. Kaleb[1] had been absent the day before during our circle time reading of Oliver Jeffers' The Heart and the Bottle (2010). I, Catherine, was about to read it to him.[2]***

This reading was part of a year-long project that saw us collaborating with six expert preschool teachers and over 60 preschool students across three different senior-level preschool classrooms. We had been working on a project focused on hard, painful feelings of grief and trauma and the necessity of remaining open in order to experience the myriad emotions life offers us. This had been a huge undertaking that often proved painful for teachers and students alike.

In many ways, the project began before Shoshana and I met. Having spent a decade teaching preschool, I was returning to doctoral studies in order to reflect on questions of early childhood literacy in my own research. In my teaching practice, I had often come up against colleagues who persisted in reading "tired" picture books, books we might label easy, that never seemed to pose many "problems"—books that did not deal with difficult topics or tackle hard-to-discuss social issues.

Shoshana had spent the past decade teaching undergraduate courses on social justice, feminism, and prison abolition. She was now a mother to a young child who was eager to be read to. As she read picture books to her son, she began to wonder about both the messages and the gaps in these texts. We met by chance in a sewing studio and, after briefly discussing our mutual love of artful picture books, settled into a years-long collaborative research relationship.

This particular project was dreamed up during a coffee shop meeting between Shoshana and me. We worried that our academic ideas and analyses of picture book texts were not reaching our desired audiences: teachers and preschool students (Magnet & Tremblay-Dion,[3] 2018, 2019). We decided to approach three preschool centers, each affiliated with a local college of early childhood education, in a mid-sized Canadian city.

We were particularly interested in representations of grief and trauma in picture books. We reviewed several books that we enjoyed but settled on *The Heart and the Bottle* (Jeffers, 2010). This story centers on a young girl who, upon losing her caregiver figure, places her heart in a glass bottle to protect it. As this book included the problematic notion of "shutting down," (symbolized by placing her heart in a bottle), a concept which was hard to find represented in picture books, the project we designed featured only this text.

When all three preschool classrooms responded positively to our pitch to work together, we started designing the three-part experience that would accompany the introduction of this text to the children. During our first experience we invited teachers to read *The Heart and the Bottle* to the children during their regularly scheduled circle time. We provided an open-ended discussion guide to help teachers have a conversation with their students about the book and the students' responses to it. The second experience

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1 All names have been changed to protect student confidentiality.
2 Italics signify the shift to telling the story of our reading with Kaleb.
3 Catherine-Laura Dunnington (formerly Tremblay-Dion).

featured a movement prompt when children were tasked with embodying some of the hard feelings the book highlights. Finally, our third experience tasked children with a collage-making art center where they could illustrate their own interpretations of Jeffers' book.

It is important to note that at the time of our study, "experience" was a term widely used within the preschool centers we visited. This project reflects the language norms of each center in deference to the expertise of the educators we collaborated with. Now, however, most centers use the term "provocation" (instead of the term "experience") to signal that an invitation to engage with materials, thoughts, stories, and movements has been made to the children without anticipating any particular response (Felderman, Kissel, & Nash, 2015). While our project uses the word "experience," the educators we collaborated with understood this term as synonymous with the now widely used term "provocation."

At one of the preschools a young boy named Kaleb and his response to the book particularly caught our attention. Kaleb had expressed interest after having "missed out" the day before.

> ***I took Kaleb into my lap and began reading. Despite his initial interest in the book he was now giggling, touching my cheek and wiggling back and forth (which was starting to hurt). It was difficult to tell if the story mattered, and it was getting hot.***

All the teachers we worked with provided us with minimal background information about their students. We knew their names, ages, and any incidental information that may have been shared, with or without intention. In the case of Kaleb, we knew that his absence the day before was "not uncommon" and that his appearance at school on this particular day, still wearing his pajamas, was not surprising. We were also aware that a few of his siblings had attended the center before him. This information was gathered anecdotally and without solicitation on our part.

The sparse knowledge of the students was something we had requested in order to observe interactions between teachers/students, students/students, and ourselves/students with the least amount of preconceived bias. While we may have inferred that perhaps Kaleb had a challenging home structure that led to his absences and the non-committal remarks made regarding his wearing of pajamas, there was no information to corroborate this. Indeed, any harried parent of a young child can empathize with allowing a strongly opinionated pajama-clad preschooler to make her way out the door in the morning.

Making Connections

> ***Kaleb and I had just reached the double-page spread in Jeffers' text where the main character, a nameless little girl, faces an empty chair in a darkening room. His attention remained seemingly focused on his own body movements and exploration of my cheek.***

The Heart and the Bottle, pp. 13-14, Oliver Jeffers© 2010

It is on this double-paged spread that the reader is tasked with imagining the little girl's loss, embodied by the darkening empty chair, once filled and bathed in light. Jeffers does not extrapolate on the precise loss she is facing; thus, we are free to envision our own losses, or to picture her nameless pain alongside her.

Scholar Jessica Whitelaw (2017) offers insight into this type of book, and these particular pages, in her article "Beyond the Bedtime Story: In Search of Epistemic Possibilities and the Innovative Potential of Disquieting Picturebooks." She argues that children's picture books, so often used to quiet the body and the mind at bedtime, are actually uniquely able to present challenging material. The picture book can disrupt the status quo and offer an invitation to both critical thought and discomfort. A book like *The Heart and the Bottle* calls children to embrace hard, "disquieting" emotions. It thus offers Whitelaw's (2017) five epistemic invitations of a disquieting text: it embraces ambiguity, is open to hurt, pauses for interruptions, witnesses resistance, and hears silence (p. 33). With its spare text, abstract-yet-familiar illustrations, and unnamed loss, *The Heart and the Bottle* is an exemplar of a "disquieting picture book."

Trauma, pain, death, and loss are experienced across difference. While pain, loss, and death are perhaps more self-evident terms, it is useful to pause on the word trauma. We align ourselves with Dutro's (2013) claim that "trauma represents an instance of what is beyond knowing" (p. 302). Trauma, for us, is a word used to encapsulate the incomprehensible experience that disrupts life and creates a disjoint between life *before* a traumatic event and life *after* it. While there are many disparate definitions and implications of the word "trauma," defining it within the "incomprehensible" or hard-to-name is a useful concept for us as researchers who work with young children. Often young children express themselves narratively in ways that are not linearly or easily understood by adult listeners (Hudson, Gebelt, Haviland, & Bentivegna, 1992). As trauma scholar Cathy Caruth has noted, underscoring the incomprehensible nature of trauma does not mean there is nothing describable about a traumatic experience. Rather, we grasp and name elements of trauma to ourselves, and at times others, while acknowledging that elements of trauma cannot be named or readily understood (Caruth, 1996). For the purposes of our work we use trauma to describe a painful life experience that ruptures what comes before and after it, and remains incomprehensible (Dutro, 2013; Berger, 1997).

Trauma, pain, death, and loss are also disproportionately present for those caught in a web of complex intersecting health and social concerns. From the ways that the prison industrial complex and mass incarceration have been used deliberately to imperil the health of people of color/queer people/people living in poverty (Maynard, 2017; Ritchie, 2017; Mogul, Ritchie, & Witlock, 2011; Gilmore, 2007), to the ways that health care is accessed unequally across lines of class, race, gender, and sexuality causing unnecessary suffering and premature death (Gay, 2014; Roberts, 1997), to the ways that access to secure forms of housing and employment remain structured by what bell hooks calls "white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy" and settler colonialism (Abu-Zahra & Kay, 2012; Yee, 2011; hooks & Jhally, 1997), we cannot think about grief and loss without thinking about intersectional inequalities.

> ***By now I was feeling desperate; perhaps reading this book was futile and I had better stop. Kaleb's classroom was the last one we visited and perhaps the exhaustion of a long-lasting research endeavor was grating on me as I prepared to give up on this particular moment, child, and read-aloud. In an admittedly lame-hearted effort to recapture Kaleb's interest in the story I traced the empty chair with my finger and whispered to myself, "I wonder what she is feeling." I didn't expect a response.***
>
> ***Then Kaleb, without pause, said certainly, "She's angry just like me! She wants her daddy." I was speechless.***

Finding a Mirror

Kaleb was drawing himself and the little girl together, meshing her fictional pain with his own real-life expression of anger. He was living through what author Linda Sue Park (2015) says books offer: "[A]s life is unfair…[they are] a way to glimpse how others face this unfairness" (2:22). Parents, perhaps Kaleb's daddy included, disappear because of death, illness, choice, and state policies that mandate mass incarceration. It is never fair when a child loses a parent and children lose parents directly as a result of the ways that White supremacy, sexism, ableism, and classism intersect in order to make some parents more vulnerable to disappearing or being disappeared than others. Drawing connections between himself and the little girl allowed Kaleb to see himself in the loss of "her daddy," an unfair experience that was "just like" his own.

> ***Unsure how to proceed I remained silent. I waited for Kaleb to clue me in to what he needed. He looked up at me and smiled, played once more with my hair. I decided to echo his words back to him, saying, "She's angry just like you. She misses her father." He smiled broader and said simply, "Yeah," and turned the page for me.***

In the context of this disquieting text, Kaleb had found either a mirror of his own experience, or a window into it. Here was the potential for using disquieting texts in the classroom, as our project had hoped to do. We were witness to Kaleb finding a book-mirror. It was one of those books read in childhood that "becomes a means of self-affirmation" (Bishop, 1990, xi).

Certainly, our labeling of this "mirror moment" for Kaleb is an assumption. It may be that Kaleb saw a path into his experience. It may be that this book gave him a way to continue to discuss or express his emotions, but with someone else at some other time. We cannot know for sure. As Dutro (2013) points out, inviting disquieting picture book texts into the classroom recognize[s] and embrace[s] the disorientation of living in the not quite known, entering a space we cannot quite fathom, but wherein lies potential for vital connection with ourselves and others (p. 304).

Two days later his teachers did not have any further insight into Kaleb's exclamation, and due to the limitations of our project it was not possible to make more inquiries. While we may not be able to offer further insight into this momentary connection between Kaleb and our picture book, we can acknowledge the experience of listening to a young child feeling anger or expressing past anger.

Trouble Ahead

As in life, this was a project filled with challenges, foreseen and not. We did not anticipate the difficulty posed by the metaphorical concept of "heart" as a repository of emotions. It often seemed poorly suited to the concrete world of early childhood. The children who often envisioned a *literal* heart, thus, were stymied by the girl's literal heart in a bottle. Similarly, they were not always able to wonder about her caretaker's loss and what it might mean to her metaphorically. Although not necessarily problematic, in future work we are considering adding explicit educator statements such as "Maybe he died, or maybe he had to go away. Maybe he left on purpose" (Dunnington & Magnet, 2020).

We did anticipate that using such a painful text might challenge teachers to slow down and accept their own feelings in relation to both the book and the children's responses. If "trauma represents an instance of what is beyond knowing even as traumatic stories demand witness," this truth echoes within the text for both the teacher and the student who listens and experiences the story (Dutro, 2013, p. 302). This experience-

magnification emphasizes “what it means to carry, to live, [and] to invite traumatic stories into the space of a literacy classroom” (Dutro, 2013, p. 302). For a child such as Kaleb, who reflected his own trauma story eloquently in relation to the central character’s trauma, the teacher is tasked not only with witnessing his experience, but inviting this type of work into her classroom.

Windows for Teachers

Throughout our entire project, we observed that it was a struggle for teachers to read *The Heart and the Bottle*. Teachers often became emotional while they were reading it. They teared up, or choked up, or were unable to continue reading, causing them discomfort. They expressed their difficulties to us. One teacher told us she had to practice reading the book to be “ready not to cry” in front of the preschoolers. Another teacher said simply, “It’s such a *sad* book.”

Every teacher we worked with bravely read this book to the children anyway. Their commitment to their preschoolers and the project was admirable. Yet we were left wondering how to deal with this disjuncture between the pedagogical literature that cites how important this type of work is and the lived experience of how painful it is to do it. How many teachers are prepared to carry it out?

How can we best support teachers to do this work? A preschool teacher is tasked, every single day, with letting go of their own needs in favor of the immediacy of the children’s needs. Is this also the case with the disquieting text? No preschool teacher who read *The Heart and the Bottle* aloud acknowledged her own emotions in front of the children. But this type of disclosure, though possibly difficult, might also be humanizing.

Perhaps a future pedagogy of disquieting texts should leave room for the reader to appropriately acknowledge how the book makes *them* feel. Bishop reminds us that “When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror” (1990, xi). While a teacher using a disquieting text might be trying to show children a window, she may encounter a mirror reflecting herself and her pain. A read-aloud is both read and heard: there is someone on both sides.

Conclusion

We have given away copies of Jeffers’ *The Heart and the Bottle* like Halloween candy to children and teachers. “Have a copy,” we say, “we think it might help.” We see this important picture book as one that invites teachers to witness pain within their classrooms. Yet we also view this text, and the work of witnessing, within the larger context of social justice education. In *Critiquing Social Justice Picture Books*, Grace Enriquez (2014) argues that we need to evaluate picture books not just on whether they deal with social justice issues (White supremacy, homelessness, or poverty) but on whether they foreground materials that “provoke pause and deeper examination of the accepted and unquestioned perspective, values, and practices around us” (27). Enriquez’s “pause” is similar to what Whitelaw (2017) envisions in books that allow the reader to hear silences.

Children’s books can provoke a critical evaluation of our world, the challenges, and the inherent possibilities for social transformation, all while keeping hope alive and central to narrative, in a way that does not aim to “expedite” a solution to complex social problems (Enriquez, 2014). As Jeffers’ text closes, the little girl has replaced her heart and reopened herself to the complexities of the emotions fundamental to living. This comes after many pages of having her heart-in-the-bottle, and freezing herself from pain. Inviting this book,

and a response such as Kaleb's, into a classroom space is risky, purposeful work. It foregrounds silence and "critical witnessing."

The imperative we put forth in this project is not one that privileges action, activity, or tangible intervention. Simply put, we are calling the reading of a disquieting text a radical act and the subsequent call to sit with the discomfort such a text might invoke revolutionary (Dutro, 2009). If the transformative and courageous behavior of protesters risking death to denounce police and state violence to communities of color in the current moment of 2020 teaches us anything, it is the stakes of asking people to sit with their feelings of discomfort in the face of brutalizing systems of power and oppression.

State power and police will literally silence protesters rather than be confronted with the pain that White supremacy causes. We are offering the field of early childhood education no tidy solution; instead, we call on teachers to join us in reading these types of books and sitting with the aftermath, whatever it may be. Sometimes the children do not respond, but they may respond someday. With this project, we are hoping to collectively build a world in which children become adults who know how to sit with feelings of discomfort, a life- and world-changing skill. Sometimes a child's response is painful and uncomfortable, but we are called to act as critical witnesses anyway (Dutro, 2009). Sometimes our own response to the picture book is raw and painful, but we might offer the children a model of someone reading and sitting with their own disquieting emotions.

This is work we need.

This is work that hurts.

This is Kaleb reminding us, "She's angry *just like me*."

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