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## What Do You Do When You Don't Know How to Respond? Supporting Pre-Service Teachers to Use Picture Books to Facilitate Difficult Conversations

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# What Do You Do When You Don't Know How to Respond? Supporting Pre-Service Teachers to Use Picture Books to Facilitate Difficult Conversations

Kathryn Struthers Ahmed and Nida Ali

## A Pre-Service Teacher's Fourth-Grade Classroom

Nida Ali,<sup>1</sup> a pre-service graduate student doing her twice-weekly field placement in a fourth-grade classroom, had just put up a decorated slide with one of her favorite Malcolm X quotes: "Don't be in a hurry to condemn because he doesn't do what you do or think as you think or as fast. There was a time when you didn't know what you know today." She was hoping to discuss his words and how they could be applied to students' lives, particularly because the fourth graders in this "gifted and talented" class expressed negative sentiments toward students who were not as academically advanced as they were.

As soon as she projected the slide, before she could even begin the lesson, a student called out, "Malcolm X was a racist and a murderer!"

Nida was not prepared to be challenged with negative comments about her favorite historical figure. For someone who reads Malcolm X's autobiography two times a year, this was a punch to the gut, and she had no idea how to respond. Pivoting to sidestep her uncertainty and discomfort, she avoided discussing Malcolm X, saying, "Let's ignore who said the quote and just discuss what it means." Students began coming up with interpretations of the quote, such as, "Not everyone is as smart as you," and "Not everyone knows as much as you do," and then, finally, "Some people may not know as much as you do but it is important to remember that we didn't always know the things we know now."

Reflecting on the unnerving reaction to her carefully planned lesson, Nida regretted not taking time to address her students' misconceptions about Malcolm X and his role in history. She was too afraid of being placed in an awkward position, and she imagined having to answer to angry parents who wanted their children to have a curated, "safe" understanding of American history and may not have wanted their children exposed to more radical philosophies.

At the time of this incident, Nida was a student in Kathryn Struthers Ahmed's graduate-level Beginning Elementary Literacy Methods course for pre-service teachers. When Nida described what had happened, Kathryn responded by recommending a picture book to help Nida engage with her students around Malcolm X, his life, and his legacy. Kathryn suggested reading *Malcolm Little: The Boy Who Grew Up to Become Malcolm X* (Shabazz, 2013). It was not until she read the call for papers for this issue of Bank Street's *Occasional Papers Series* that she followed up with Nida about whether she had read the book and discussed Malcolm X further with her fourth graders, and began to reflect on how inadequate her response had been.

## A Teacher Educator's Literacy Methods Course

The following semester, a similar scene occurred, this time in Kathryn's Advanced Elementary Literacy Methods course, where Nida was once again a student. In this course, which focused on disciplinary literacy, Kathryn read aloud a picture book in class each week. In addition to books with characters from a diverse range of backgrounds, many books were centered on historical and contemporary issues of social justice.

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1 Nida Ali was a student in Kathryn Struthers Ahmed's consecutive, semester-long graduate literacy methods courses. At the time of writing this article, Ms. Ali was a graduate student but no longer in Dr. Ahmed's courses.

For example, Kathryn read *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993), about life in Japanese internment camps during World War II, and *I Am Not a Number* (Dupuis & Kacer, 2016), the story of Dupuis's grandmother's traumatic experience in a residential boarding school for Native youth. Pre-service teachers generally responded positively to these books, engaging in discussions about how the texts could be used for multiple purposes, such as teaching often overlooked social studies content, teaching from a social justice stance, and teaching reading comprehension strategies and literary devices.

Kathryn was therefore surprised by some pre-service teachers' reactions to *Pride: Harvey Milk and the Story of the Rainbow Flag* (Sanders, 2018). The book talks about Harvey Milk and the gay rights movement of the 1970s, ending with a stunning illustration of the White House lit up in rainbow flag colors the day in June 2015 when same-sex marriage was federally legalized. Kathryn had prepared for a discussion about the interdisciplinary potential of the book across grade levels. She began by posing the following question: How might you use this text within a larger, interdisciplinary literacy and social studies unit?

When Kathryn finished the read aloud, the pre-service teachers ignored her question and instead began voicing concerns about reading this book with elementary students. One shared that she could not imagine reading this book "where I grew up," while another commented that she would "never" read this book in the (private, religious) schools where she had previously worked. Others nodded in agreement. Kathryn was taken aback by these comments, especially given the students' general openness to addressing other, arguably "heavier," historical topics.

Kathryn remembers stumbling over her words and saying something to the effect of, "Well, this is a law... It's telling the story of how a current law came into being... It's a story about a minoritized group's fight for civil rights." One pre-service teacher countered: "Well, yes, but the book definitely has a perspective" on the law, noting that it was not a "neutral" depiction of the struggle for LGBTQ rights. Kathryn was caught off-guard by this pushback and while she cannot remember more of what was said, she did not facilitate a substantive discussion.

She left the class feeling rattled and concerned about LGBTQ-identified pre-service teachers and how they might feel about their classmates' resistance to celebrating the LGBTQ fight for equality; she was also thinking about elementary students with two moms or two dads. Kathryn felt it was important to take a stand for the minoritized group; she was unwilling to tell her students they did not have to read this book—and by extension, books about topics that might make them uncomfortable or bring up difficult conversations. At the same time, she did not want to dismiss some of the pre-service teachers' concerns. Even though Kathryn disagreed with the thinking behind their resistance, the concerns were very real for the students who raised them. Clearly, her modeling for pre-service teachers about how to facilitate difficult conversations using children's literature did not go well.

## **Background**

These incidents reflect two of the many times we have encountered moments of uncertainty in our teaching. Indeed, teaching has long been characterized as educators needing to wrestle with a variety of dilemmas or tensions (Ben-Peretz & Flores, 2018; Lampert, 1985; Stillman, 2011; Windschitl, 2002). Importantly, dilemmas in teaching are not necessarily negative; in fact, grappling with tensions can be "productive" and generative of new learning—and even improved teaching—under certain circumstances (Stillman, 2011). In our cases, we faced dilemmas around how to respond to students' comments. Nida felt tensions related to the relative lack of power she had as an intern and between her own viewpoints and her uncertainty around

how families' perspectives might differ from her own. Kathryn felt tensions around how to stand with a minoritized group while not dismissing pre-service teachers' concerns and religious beliefs. Neither of us effectively managed these tensions or effectively facilitated difficult conversations.

Children's literature is often used as a tool to approach potentially difficult conversations and "controversial" topics as well as teaching for equity and social justice in elementary classrooms (Dever, Sorenson, & Brodnick, 2005; Fain, 2008; Hartman, 2018; Husband, 2019; Kesler, Mills, & Reilly, 2020; Souto-Manning, 2009). In this paper, we place "controversial" in quotation marks to highlight the subjective and personal nature of the content we're discussing. There are fewer examples of how children's literature is used in teacher education to support pre-service teachers' learning, however (Daly & Blakeney-William, 2015; Johnston & Bainbridge, 2013; Landa & Stephens, 2017). We therefore share our experiences and use them as jumping off points to consider how we might have done a better job leveraging these incidents to facilitate pre-service teachers' learning around using children's literature—and picture books, specifically—to engage students in difficult conversations around "controversial" topics.

### **Leveraging Moments of Unpreparedness as Learning Opportunities**

There are many similarities between our classroom experiences. We were both surprised by students' comments—and therefore felt unprepared to address them. Additionally, we both had plans to dive into a different discussion, and in sticking to our plans, we bypassed students' concerns. Lastly, we both regretted how we handled the interactions. While it is impossible never to feel caught off guard while teaching, we could have better prepared ourselves for potential comments and discussions. Both of these classroom encounters could have been leveraged to facilitate pre-service teachers' learning around engaging children and youth in difficult conversations, using picture books as tools.

### ***Returning to Malcolm X***

When Nida described her fourth grader's reaction to seeing the Malcolm X quote, Kathryn's suggestion of a picture book fell far short of supporting Nida and her peers to engage in difficult conversations with elementary students. At the time when Nida shared the anecdote, Kathryn could have spent more time engaging the pre-service teachers in her class to explore Nida's experience, supporting Nida's reflection on what had occurred and inviting others to participate in the discussion. Thoughtful questions—for individual writing/thinking, for pair or small-group discussion, and/or for whole-class discussion—likely would have served to support their reflections. Kathryn might have asked, "On what do you think the student who made the comment (about Malcolm X being a racist and a murderer) is basing this claim?" This might have helped the pre-service teachers to consider the narrative this child, and possibly other children, had heard about Malcolm X, which Nida could acknowledge, build upon, and unpack moving forward.

Another question Kathryn could have posed is straightforward: "How might Nida have responded?" Pre-service teachers' collective brainstorming around possible responses would not only have helped Nida reflect on the situation but could have helped pre-service teachers think about ways to respond in the future when students made unexpected comments. Kathryn could have supported her students to realize the power of asking open-ended questions, such as, "What makes you say that?" to learn more about the student's thinking. It could also have been helpful for pre-service teachers to think about how Nida might have drawn other fourth-grade students' voices into the conversation. Similarly, it would be important to consider how Nida might learn about students' prior knowledge about the Civil Rights Movement and its leaders more generally, which she could build upon moving forward. We think that engaging in this type of collective reflection and re-imagining of Nida's in-the-moment response would have been supportive to her and her classmates, who may well face similar situations in the future.

Another important question to consider: “What could Nida have addressed immediately, and how might she have followed up later?” We think this question would help pre-service teachers understand that they do not need to have a perfectly crafted response to students’ comments right away. In fact, we maintain that taking time to gather resources and prepare thoughtful learning experiences is essential when teachers engage students in difficult conversations.

In thinking further with Nida and her classmates about how Nida might have followed up with her students, we can imagine Kathryn supporting personal reflection by asking, “What do you know about Malcolm X and how do you know what you know?” This two-part question might support some pre-service teachers to consider how little they know about Malcolm X and how that might affect their teaching choices, while prompting others to reflect on how they learned about a historical figure who receives minimal focus in school curriculum. Following this question, we could ask, “What do you think is important for students to know about Malcolm X and why?” A discussion around this question might prompt disagreements, offering pre-service teachers the opportunity to experience engaging in a potentially “controversial” topic with peers.

Kathryn could have facilitated collaborative brainstorming to think about how Nida might reintroduce the topic in future lessons and class discussions. Kathryn could have moved beyond merely mentioning one picture book. Kathryn could have brought two picture books into class: *Malcolm Little: The Boy Who Would Grow Up to Become Malcolm X* (Shabazz, 2013) and *Malcolm X, A Fire Burning Brightly* (Myers, 2000). She could have facilitated small-group discussions around how to use these books (among other sources) to engage students in conversations around Malcolm X’s life and legacy.

*Malcolm Little* tells the story of Malcolm X’s childhood, focusing on the values his parents instilled in him, especially love and equality. For students who may have heard only negative depictions of Malcolm X, this book could help humanize him. They could perhaps see similarities in his parents’ love for him and in their grown-ups’ love for them; perhaps they could empathize with some of the hardships Malcolm X faced as a child. Pre-service teachers could have collaboratively brainstormed discussion questions—and considered potential responses—to engage students with the text.

*Malcolm X, a Fire Burning Brightly* almost picks up where *Malcolm Little* leaves off, focusing on the ups and downs of his adult life. Parts of this book could be used to directly address Nida’s student’s comment, as it mentions how Malcolm X was “labeled a bigot” for saying that “black people should separate from whites” (Myers, 2000) before changing his mind after converting to Islam. Pre-service teachers could think together about how they might support students to consider the reasons behind Malcolm X’s differing positions.

The books also support the opportunity for students to express differing opinions in a way that maintains their dignity. Importantly, neither book shies away from the hard times in Malcolm X’s life, such as his childhood home being burned down, his father being killed by the Ku Klux Klan, and Malcolm X’s gang involvement, which led to his imprisonment. Thus, these texts can be used to facilitate classroom discussions around the complexities of Malcolm X’s life and, by extension, other lives. The books support, for example, discussion of complex questions such as:

- How do life experiences shape a person?
- Where did Malcolm X stand on the question of whether it is ever okay/necessary to use violence when fighting for major social change, and why? Where do you stand on that question, and why?
- Is it ever okay/worthwhile to separate people based on race (or another demographic category)? Why or why not?

By having pre-service teachers engage with one another around these texts, generate discussion questions, consider possible student comments, and brainstorm potential teacher responses, they would be able to prepare for how they might use picture books as tools to facilitate difficult conversations in their future classrooms.

### **Returning to *Pride***

There were also many missed opportunities from not following up on Kathryn's reading of *Pride* in the literacy methods course. Specifically, there are three spaces in which Kathryn could have improved this conversation, thereby supporting pre-service teachers to use literature to engage in similar conversations with their future students: before, during, and after reading.

Before reading this text, Kathryn might have done more concerted thinking. It would have been helpful to think about pre-service teachers' potential discomfort with the text's content (e.g., considered how some religions view same-sex marriage). Kathryn could also have reflected on her own biases, recognizing that just because she does not find something "controversial" does not mean it is not "controversial" to others. Similarly, she could have considered the assumptions she was making; specifically, living in New York City, she assumed that nearly everyone has progressive values. She could have spent time preparing how to respond to her students' concerns, anticipating potential resistance, and crafting follow-up questions. Thinking about these aspects before reading the book in class would have helped Kathryn be more prepared for students' comments.

During reading and in the initial subsequent conversation, we can imagine ways Kathryn might have better facilitated a discussion with pre-service teachers. Instead of jumping into talking about interdisciplinarity, she could have posed additional questions to accompany the text, such as:

- Would you read this book with students—why or why not?
- For which students might this text be an important "mirror," one that reflects their lived experiences? For which students might this text be an important "window" or "sliding glass door" (Bishop, 1990) into a world that is different from their own?
- How can literature be used to teach about recent/current events?
- What might you do if you (personally, culturally, religiously, politically) disagree with a current law, policy, and/or practice that comes up in your classroom?

Discussing and debating these questions with peers could provide another opportunity for pre-service teachers to practice engaging in difficult conversations themselves, which ideally would support them to feel more comfortable facilitating similar conversations with children.

We think Kathryn should have taken a stronger stance toward including this LGBTQ text in the classroom and at the same time, should have been less dismissive of pre-service teachers' concerns. This is a tricky balance to accomplish. One way she could have done this would have been by posing open-ended questions to pre-service teachers who voiced resistance to learn more about their perspectives, potentially leading to problem-solving around how to approach their resistance. For instance, she might approach pre-service teachers who were worried about parents' reactions differently from pre-service teachers who were personally against gay marriage. Kathryn also could have opened the discussion to the whole class by asking, "What do others think?" It would have been beneficial to give her students an opportunity to write, talk with a partner, and talk in small groups to facilitate broader (and lower-risk) participation.

After reading and the initial discussion, Kathryn might have expanded pre-service teachers' learning in several ways. She could have brought in additional LGBTQ-focused children's literature for reading and small group discussion. Two suggestions are *Sewing the Rainbow: The Story of Gilbert Baker and the Rainbow Flag* (Pitman, 2018) and *Stonewall: A Building, an Uprising, a Revolution* (Sanders, 2019). She could have modeled how narrative nonfiction picture books like *Pride* might be used in conjunction with primary sources, such as newspaper articles and court decisions. It would have been beneficial for her students if Kathryn had made her own reflections transparent, acknowledging that she felt she did not handle the discussion well. This would open up a conversation about how the students experienced the discussion and how it affected their thinking about working with "controversial" materials, as well as inviting reflection on how she might have done things differently. By more intentionally planning for before, during, and after reading interactions, pre-service teachers would have seen a stronger model for how to approach difficult topics and been better prepared to enact this kind of work themselves.

### **Pre-Service Teacher Learning Through Reimagined Experiences**

We hope that pre-service teachers would come away from our experiences bringing up Malcolm X and Harvey Milk in our classrooms with an understanding that teachers sometimes feel surprised and caught off guard by students' comments and/or questions—and that's okay! It is also okay for a teacher to return to a particular issue, comment, or topic once they have had the opportunity to think about it more thoroughly, gather resources, and prepare discussion questions.

We hope that by deliberately discussing the challenges that can arise when teachers take on "controversial" topics, they will be better prepared to make a commitment to not shy away from these topics. This is important because kids hear about and experience difficult issues in their daily lives; avoiding them—especially when children bring them up—diminishes their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Avoiding these topics also serves to reify single, normalized narratives about whose lives and concerns matter. Facilitating students' deepened understanding, through children's literature and class discussions within a supportive community, can serve to validate students' experiences, alleviate their fears, and support them to consider multiple perspectives. As such, we hope that directly addressing "controversial" topics will expand pre-service teachers' sense of responsibility to create a more welcoming classroom community, not only for minoritized youth to feel included but also for youth from dominant backgrounds to recognize their privilege and the potential limitations of their views.

We also want pre-service teachers to reflect on the concept of "controversial" itself. Clearly, what one person finds "controversial," another person might not. Indeed, it was differing perspectives on what is "controversial" that caused us to feel unprepared for our students' challenges—and what caused our students to challenge us when, from their perspectives, we asked them to learn from "a murderer" and read about people whose sexuality contradicts their beliefs. Accordingly, it is important for teachers to recognize and be sensitive to the diversity of opinions, perspectives, and experiences within the classroom community. Beginning with self-reflection can be helpful, as teachers need to be aware of their own biases (Zeichner & Liston, 2014).

Therefore, pre-service teachers need to engage in critical reflections around some tough questions. They might consider, "How might my (implicit) biases and/or beliefs contribute to inequity and/or silencing in the classroom? And, what can I do about it?" For example, if a pre-service teacher's religion condemns homosexuality and esteems heterosexual marriage, they might not be aware that every time they discuss families, they speak in ways that normalize two-parent, heterosexual homes. This silences the experiences

of children who have other family configurations. Even if all of their students live with a married mom and dad, it is important for children to learn that many different types of families exist and all are bound together by love. In this case, a pre-service teacher can intentionally search for books that include representations of diverse families and can work to change their heteronormative language, such as by saying “grown-ups” instead of “mom and dad.”

Self-reflections of this nature can be challenging, so the instructor should expect some pushback. Indeed, in the above example, it is possible that a pre-service teacher might believe strongly that other forms of family structures are sinful. In instances such as these, we maintain that, ultimately, the instructor must take the side of inclusivity and, as the person with power in the classroom, must speak up for the minoritized (in this case, the LGBTQ community). Even if a pre-service teacher does not believe in family structures outside of two married, opposite-sex parents, they exist, and it would be a disservice to all children to not include them in the classroom. Ultimately, as educators, we must place student learning and well-being at the center of our work, even if it makes us uncomfortable or goes against our personal beliefs; this is important for pre-service teachers to understand. Instructors can treat pre-service teachers with dignity—such as by asking open-ended questions, using a respectful tone, and listening authentically to their concerns—while still insisting that they create an inclusive and welcoming classroom.

Finally, we want pre-service teachers to consider children’s literature as an effective and powerful tool for facilitating difficult conversations around a range of contemporary and historical issues. Children’s literature can provide an anchor for discussion and can introduce students to new content and/or multiple perspectives. The language in the text(s) might help teachers think about their framing of “controversial” topics. We would hope that these ideas, taken together, would support pre-service teachers to approach difficult conversations with intention.

### **Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Engage in Difficult Conversations**

In order for pre-service teachers to be prepared to have difficult conversations about “controversial” topics with their students, they need to practice doing so during pre-service preparation. Though teaching will always involve moments of unpreparedness, we suggest that the following assignments, which purposefully involve “controversial” topics and using children’s literature to address them, have the potential to further support pre-service teachers’ learning.

#### ***Interdisciplinary Unit Plan Addressing a “Controversial” Topic***

In light of our experiences we propose redesigning the final project in Kathryn’s Advanced Elementary Literacy Methods course: an interdisciplinary literacy and social studies unit plan. The current assignment includes writing an introductory rationale, creating a unit outline, selecting three or four mentor texts to be used throughout the unit, designing two detailed lesson plans based on the texts, teaching one of the lessons in pre-service teachers’ fieldwork placements, and reflecting on the lesson. We propose revisions to each aspect of the assignment that we believe will support pre-service teachers to grapple with the inherent dilemmas involved in using children’s literature to address “controversial” topics.

First, we would challenge pre-service teachers to intentionally select a topic that makes them—or could make them—uncomfortable if/when it comes up in the classroom. We would ask them to consider topics that either have been brought up by students, have arisen in the books we have read together, or that they could imagine being relevant for elementary students due to current events or their knowledge of children’s lives. For example, the murder of Black people by police officers would be a difficult topic to address, yet

one that students have likely been exposed to due to its alarming prevalence and the dramatic rise in prominence of the Black Lives Matters movement in the summer of 2020.

An important caveat, however, is that pre-service teachers should not feel compelled to select a topic that has the potential to elicit comments that could be hurtful and/or damaging to them. For example, if a pre-service teacher is an undocumented immigrant, discussing the Trump administration's treatment of migrants at the border might be a topic the pre-service teacher has good reason to avoid, in the interest of self-preservation within a potentially hostile climate. The course instructor would need to ensure this message is clearly communicated, as there could be a fine line between a difficult topic and a harmful one.

The assignment would require an introductory rationale and a personal reflection about why this topic makes them uncomfortable and their experience designing a unit around their topic. Additionally, we would ask them to consider mentor texts that present different perspectives on the topic to support students to see multiple sides of an issue. Again, this would depend on the topic, because some issues do not lend themselves to equal presentation of multiple sides. It is particularly important to foreground minoritized voices, such as immigrants, LGBTQ individuals, and Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color because we do not want to give equal weight to the oppressor's perspectives.

The instructor would want to lead the discussions regarding whether and how to address multiple sides of an issue. We maintain that it is the responsibility of the instructor to speak up for minoritized groups and ensure their voices are represented in these text collections. Especially in cases where one side on an issue espouses homophobic, racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and/or other hateful views, the instructor can support pre-service teachers to realize that the "sides" do not need to be presented "equally," just as it is okay for a teacher to condemn historical atrocities such as enslavement and the Holocaust. We recognize that a particular topic might be uncomfortable for a pre-service teacher precisely because they find the other perspective antithetical to their worldview; it might be why they selected the topic. Here, we suggest working closely with individual preservice teachers to consider how—or if—the other "side" might be presented to students, erring on the side of inclusivity and respect for differences, as long as differing opinions are not grounded in another group's oppression.

We would also revise the reflection questions pre-service teachers consider after teaching one of their planned lessons. These questions would focus on the class discussions, how students engaged in the material, what they might have done differently to deepen students' thinking around their difficult issue, how their own discomfort manifested in the classroom, and so on. We would keep questions around what changes pre-service teachers would make to their instruction the next time to better support student learning and engagement.

Lastly, we would want to ensure that instructors utilizing this assignment devote considerable class time to discussing and workshopping it in class. We imagine that throughout the process of developing this unit, pre-service teachers would need time to grapple with their selected topic, especially given that they would have identified the topic as one that makes them uncomfortable. Within a supportive community, pre-service teachers would need to be given time to talk in small groups and reflect on their experiences.

## Literacy in the Community

Another assignment in Kathryn's course, called "Literacy in the Community," could be revised to work especially well to support pre-service teachers in wrestling with the tensions involved with addressing potentially difficult or "controversial" topics in the classroom. This assignment follows reading Lyman (2012), McNamara and Andes (2016), and Orellana and Hernández (1999), all of whom provide examples of taking students out into the world to engage in community- and place-based education. The project then involves pre-service teachers in planning a local field trip that highlights the daily literacies in students' communities.

Revisions could be made to more explicitly support pre-service teachers to engage students in difficult conversations to bring children's literature together with the world around them. For example, the assignment could focus on an issue that is either currently or has historically been important and "controversial" in the school's community. The revised assignment would include pre- and post-field trip work that purposefully includes children's literature addressing the issue.

Nida, in fact, did this, using the assignment as an opportunity to further explore how she might have supported her students' learning about Malcolm X. She designed these learning experiences the semester following the incident where her student called Malcolm X a "murderer." The assignment served as a "thought experiment" about what Nida wished she could have been done or what she might do in the future. Nida's placement school was located near Lenox Avenue, also known as Malcolm X Boulevard, in New York's Harlem, a neighborhood with a long history as a hub of cultural, literary, and intellectual movements. Thus, her project morphed into a community walk along Malcolm X Boulevard, including visits to famed sites related to Malcolm X's legacy.

Nida planned for students to walk from the Tito Puente Statue to Marcus Garvey Park on Malcolm X Boulevard and 120th Street. Students would tour the Malcolm Shabazz Mosque on 116th Street and the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood on 112th Street and walk through the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market. She planned for the community walk to be preceded by a week of exposure to various texts, including picture books, photographs, and videos of speeches relating to Malcolm X and the Civil Rights Movement roots in Harlem.

Nida's project emphasized how texts can be utilized effectively when students are able to connect what they read to their lives and community. One aspect of her assignment, for example, involved reading aloud *Malcom Little* (Shabazz, 2013) and having students "write about life lessons they have learned from their parents, guardians, or anyone that has inspired them... support[ing] [students'] literacy development and reinforc[ing] their connection with the text."

Nida happened to be teaching in an area that was directly connected to Malcolm X, though this assignment could be expanded to go beyond walking trips from pre-service teachers' schools. They could view exhibits at libraries and museums, visit local landmarks, interview people with relevant experience, and so on. Through planning for different ways of engaging students around a "controversial" issue that is or was important in their community, pre-service teachers ideally would be better prepared to create similar learning experiences that explored the issues surrounding students' potentially challenging comments or questions in their future classrooms.

## Conclusion

As educators committed to equity and social justice, we maintain the importance of tackling potentially difficult and/or “controversial” topics with elementary students. Perhaps the most crucial take-away from these experiences for us has been a renewed resolve to engage with students when they challenge us, not avoid conversations for which we feel unprepared. We commit to responding openly to students when questioned, aiming to learn more about their perspectives. We also commit to taking time to prepare for further discussions, knowing, of course, that we will not (ever) have all of the “answers.” We will turn to the invaluable content created by social-justice focused educational organizations perspective—such as **Rethinking Schools, Teaching for Change, Teaching Tolerance**, and the **Zinn Education Project**—as we gather resources to bring back to our classrooms. We commit to the ongoing work of reflecting on and refining our practice.

We encourage teacher educators to support pre-service teachers to begin thinking about how they might engage students in difficult conversations, whether they are related to what’s happening in children’s lives, current events in the news, and/or historical topics in curricular content. We maintain that using children’s literature in the teacher education classroom, along with thoughtful discussion questions and intentionally crafted course assignments, has the potential to support pre-service teachers to feel comfortable engaging around difficult or “controversial” topics with elementary students.

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