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Introduction: Facilitating Conversations on Difficult Topics in the Classroom: Teachers' Stories of Opening Spaces Using Children's Literature

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Facilitating Conversations on Difficult Topics in the Classroom: Teachers' Stories of Opening Spaces Using Children's Literature

Mollie Welsh Kruger, Susie Rolander, and Susan Stires

Educators have long extolled the brilliance of Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) and her exploration of how books can serve as both mirrors and windows for children—mirrors in which children can see themselves and windows that widen their world. What if we broadened her formulation to include the realm of conversation? We assert that books are the base and what follows is the possibility of rich, deep conversations in classrooms.

For this edition of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series*, we invited educators to share stories from their practice: times when they utilized children's literature and conversations to address real life; the difficult topics that children experience through the mirror of their own experiences or the windows of their peers, communities, or world.

As guest editors for this issue, we (Mollie, Susie, and Susan) are strongly influenced by Bank Street College, an institution that values the intersection of academic learning and the real world. In fact, the credo states, "The mission of Bank Street College is to improve the education of children and their teachers by applying to the education process all available knowledge about learning and growth and by connecting teaching and learning meaningfully to the outside world" (Mitchell, 1951).

This edition underscores these beliefs. These stories are the stories of educators who have tried, and sometimes stumbled, and are showing us their vulnerabilities. In each story, there is profound learning from the conversations that emerge from books.

From its inception, Bank Street College of Education has recognized the value of narrative and the importance of using children's literature, together with a focus on social justice and critical inquiry. The Bank Street philosophy, also referred to as the developmental-interaction approach, is centered in constructivism, wherein learners maintain a curious stance and create deep meaning by participating in a community of learners (Nager & Shapiro, 2000).

Two historical groups of educators embody these values regarding children's literature and the Bank Street developmental-interaction approach. In 1937, Bank Street's founder Lucy Sprague Mitchell started the **Writers Lab**, supporting children's book authors in their creations, specifically with consideration for the development of young children. In addition, for over 100 years, the Bank Street Children's Book Committee has crafted lists of the **Best Books of the Year** to provide resources to families, educators, and librarians.

Although the topic of this edition has been explored in other academic journals—for example, *Young Children* published Mankiw and Strasser's "Tender Topics: Exploring Sensitive Issues with Pre-K through First Grade through Read-Alouds" in March 2013—the exploration of sometimes contentious topics using children's literature with students continues to present challenges for teachers and teacher educators. *Language Arts* has been addressing these challenges in unthemed issues for the last couple of years by including essays and research on gender/sexuality, death/grief, homelessness, and disabilities.

As we write in the late summer of 2020, we are in the midst of both a global pandemic and a global movement for racial justice. We cannot help but be mindful that there is an urgency to our work with many of these topics at the local, national, and global levels and at all stages of education.

In our work as literacy teacher educators devoted to social justice and to meeting our students' needs, we have had numerous meaningful conversations with pre-service teacher candidates about using children's literature in relation to difficult topics. Sometimes we initiated these conversations, and at other times, they were brought to the classes by the students or by world events. These are the same portals through which such topics arose in our classrooms when we taught elementary students; that is, some were teacher-generated and some student-generated.

Susie, as an elementary reading specialist, often chose read-alouds to bring issues to the students—in a way similar to the efforts described by Ted Kesler and colleagues (2020) on teaching social justice through interactive read-alouds. A picture book that generated meaningful and intense discussion with younger students was *Malala's Magic Pencil* by Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai (2017), which focuses on girls' rights. With older elementary students, Susie explored housing and food insecurity via *Crenshaw* by Katherine Applegate (2015), the story of a worried 10-year-old boy and his imaginary friend, Crenshaw, a cat.

Mollie's seminal experience occurred when she was a second grade teacher and was student-generated. 7-year-old Diamond approached her and said, "I have a secret." Her tone was not playful; she was hesitant and serious, but she seemed grateful to be able to confide her secret: the woman who dropped her off at school every day was not her mother, but her foster mother. From her read-aloud bookshelf, Mollie pulled out Jacqueline Woodson's (2002) book, *Our Gracie Aunt*. It is the story of two siblings who are left at home by their mother who struggles with mental health issues. Mollie presented this compelling book to Diamond, who was vehement in her insistence on sharing it with her classmates. There was rich discussion during and after the reading, establishing many connections around the experience of important people in our lives leaving us in one way or another. Teachers can never be completely sure where the conversation about books leads us; it depends on the students, their experiences, and wonderings.

Susan recalls both teacher-generated and student-generated topics and the use of children's literature, especially during her last years as a primary teacher. However, the most significant experience, from which a brief but intense emergent curriculum arose, was generated by a student and the "literature" was his own text. The issue, animal rights, was close to his heart. He convinced his classmates that hunting (as could be observed in rural Maine where the students lived) violated those rights. What followed were lively discussions, the making of protest signs, and some involvement of other perspectives.

We know that our experiences were common and continue to be so, but that doesn't mean that these situations are easy for teachers. Our decision to offer an issue on this immensely important topic was motivated by the hope of bringing more voices of teachers and teacher educators to it. The response has been varied and rich, with more essays submitted than we were able to publish. We are hopeful that this selection of twelve essays will meet at least some of the concerns that our readers have.

In the range of stories that we offer you in this issue, there is one commonality: teachers are responding to the challenges that students of all ages face in their lives. These include concerns about gender and sexuality, racism, death and grief, climate change, police brutality, class issues, trauma, family insecurity,

and mental health challenges. The essays are arranged in pairs by age/grade levels from preschool, to early elementary, middle elementary, late elementary, middle school, high school, and college. In the cases where one of the authors is an elementary teacher writing with a college or university teacher, we grouped the essay in the elementary range. It is our belief, however, that every one of these authors offers thoughtful guidance to educators (and non-educators), no matter the level with which they most identify.

Our stories begin in preschool, one (“Storytime Is a Sunrise”) in the classroom of author Carolina Soto Bonds and her students, and the other (“Angry Like Me”) in three sites where two researchers, Catherine Dunnington and Shoshanna Magnet, and six teachers collaborated. Bonds’ comprehensive narrative is told over most of a year when Will (all student and family names are pseudonyms) was in her classroom. Her lyrical telling of her experience with Will is deep, moving, introspective, and informative, as only a lived experience can be.

Dunnington and Magnet provide a stirring vignette of what occurred when Kaleb experienced the read-aloud of a “disquieting” text that they used in their research. They offer the vignette as an example of what may be experienced or “provoked” by such a read-aloud. Most important, they provide the extensive thinking and the scholarship behind their research and its outcomes.

Kerry Elson and Kindel Turner Nash (“Taking a Journey to The Land of All”) and Ysaaca Axelrod, Denise Ives, and Rachel Weaver (“We Are All Learning about Climate Change”) recognize that young children have big questions about their world. They highlight the role that children’s literature can play in helping young children develop deeper understandings. Elson and Turner Nash together, as teacher and teacher educator, model a reflective process in this work. After observing some student play in the block area, Elson developed a curriculum centered on gender identity and expression, utilizing children’s literature. She reflected on that process with Turner Nash, her thought partner.

Axelrod and Ives (two teacher educators), joined by Weaver (their pre-service teaching student), note that environmental education academics have focused on climate change for decades, yet young children were often not believed to be ready for the conversation. The authors detail the reimaging of their work to include climate change and climate justice in their elementary teacher education program. In their piece, they document the experiences and lessons learned.

The middle elementary articles, third to sixth grade, see a developmental increment in the topics explored. Noreen N. Rodríguez (“Focus on Friendship or Fights for Civil Rights? Teaching the Difficult History of Japanese American Incarceration through *The Bracelet*”) and Shelby Brody (“Gender-Inclusive Children’s Literature as a Preventative Measure: Moving Beyond a Reactive Approach to LGBTQ+ Topics in the Classroom”) explore teaching about Japanese American incarceration and studies in gender expansiveness, respectively. Rodríguez observed two teachers’ read-aloud practice around the same text; her data documents how the teachers took very different approaches to introducing young learners to the racist American history of Japanese internment.

Shelby Brody writes about adopting a more responsive approach to students’ wonderings and language about gender identity and gender expression. Brody developed a curriculum on gender expansiveness, writing from their own experience of being non-gender binary queer and responding to a student’s slur. The essay reviews the children’s literature that is available on the topic and advocates for space where queer identities are embedded within the curriculum.

In our first upper elementary selection, a fourth-grade pre-service teacher and her instructor write about how to be better equipped to address unexpected questions or comments that arise around read-alouds. Kathryn Struthers Ahmed and Nida Ali (“What Do You Do When You Don’t Know How to Respond?”) delve into strategies teachers can use when difficult topics and comments come up, while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of these startling situations.

This piece is followed by Chiara Di Lello (“Choosing Difficult, Choosing Important in Fifth-Grade Read-Aloud”). Di Lello shows us her vulnerability as she reflects on falling short in her goal of choosing more books by authors of color for her class read-alouds. She describes reading *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia (2010) with her students. What follows is a rich analysis of the discussions her class subsequently had about the Black Panthers in the summer of 1968 in Oakland, California. She leads us through these interactions, revealing both her comfort and discomfort, and helping us to grapple with the complexities and importance of such discussions.

Teachers of adolescents Carla España (“Shattering, Healing, Dreaming”) and Arianna Banack (“Discussing Race, Policing, and Privilege in a High School Classroom”) both tell stories of teaching and learning about racism in the larger society. Specifically, for España and her students in middle school, the focus is on the connection of race, class, and gender, while for Banack and her high school students, it is on race, white privilege, and police brutality. Both teachers are conscious of their own identities and provide openings for the students through the literature they offer and the activities and discussions that they promote. Both offer narratives of their students and their enacted planned curricula. For España, who partially shares the identity of many of her students, there is less tension in her story than there is for Banack, who reflects critically on her racial identity and on what she might have done differently. In the end, these educators offer plans for their future work with students, including adolescents and pre-service teachers.

Our final two pieces focus on the learning of pre-service teachers within their teacher preparation programs. In the first article, Stephen Crawley (“If I Knew Then What I Do Now”), muses on how the world of children’s literature has changed and grown since he was a classroom teacher. As a teacher of teachers, he strives to facilitate his students’ knowledge of and use of children’s literature to enable deep conversations with children.

Finally, Cara Furman (“Conversations about Death that are Provoked by Literature”) presents a story of how teachers can have conversations with young children about death, conversations that are provoked by descriptions or images of death in children’s literature. Interestingly, Furman asserts that when addressing unplanned conversations, teachers need to go “against three conventions in literacy education: close reading, staying on task, and appropriate school talk.”

Together, the authors of these essays and stories, along with their students, offer evidence of both strengths and vulnerabilities in facing the challenges in today’s world—the same ones you might be sharing with your own students. First comes the acknowledgement that these conditions exist, next the sense of responsibility to meet them head on, and finally, the implementation. Sometimes these situations have a long incubation period, giving teachers time to plan and develop curriculum; other times they happen suddenly, and we are caught unaware but need to respond quickly. We hope that this issue will give its audience the foresight and the tools to generate a planned curriculum to meet their students’ needs, along with the capacity to respond in the moment and grasp an emergent curriculum and its possibilities.

The role of children's literature has been explored many times in the academic field. What is different about this issue is that through the stories of our colleagues we become, in essence, a learning community. Louise Rosenblatt (1982) illuminates the importance of "the reciprocal interplay of reader and text." What do you, the reader, bring to each of these accounts? By presenting these powerful stories, we are not prescribing a certain, right way to use literature, but many ways that you can use it. It is the interaction that you have with these stories that is important: *your reflection* about how you can grow alongside a community of learners. So we view this not as a static document but one that grows with each reader's engagement: reading, reflecting, practicing, and passing it on.

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Additional Resources

- [Schomburg Center's Black Liberation](#)
- [Children's Book Committee](#)
- [We Need Diverse Books](#)

About the Authors



Mollie Welsh Kruger taught second grade in a Harlem public school for 18 years and five years prior in a Tremont parochial early childhood classroom. Both positions offered insights across cultural experiences and led Mollie to understandings of culturally sustaining pedagogies. While teaching elementary school, professional development opportunities included learning experiences that incorporated art into academic learning and explored the workshop model of writing and reading, which fold into her work at Bank Street. Mollie's academic interests include children's literature, students' funds of knowledge, the arts in education, and urban education. Currently, she serves as co-chair of the Bank Street College Children's Book Committee.



Susie Rolander began her life as an educator in Sonoma County, California, teaching and learning from amazing kindergarten students in a school where 20 different languages were spoken. In the dual-language program, Susie taught her students exclusively in Spanish while another teacher taught the English portion. (Her students didn't even know she could speak English!) After moving to New York City, she studied at and graduated from the Literacy Program at Bank Street Graduate School of Education. For ten years, she worked in a New York City public school as a literacy specialist, where the most delightful part of her job was connecting students with books. She has instructed and learned from graduate students at Bank Street for the past 10 years, first as an adjunct, and then as faculty. Consistently, her students' favorite part of class is when she reads aloud a children's book to end the class.



As a faculty member of the Graduate School at Bank Street College, **Susan Stires** taught writing, reading, language, and children's literature courses. She was also a lecturer at Teachers College, Columbia University, and a staff developer in New York City schools, following 30 years as an elementary school teacher. Along with a book, *With Promise*, she is the author of numerous chapters and articles on working with young students for whom literacy is often compromised. In her retirement, she has been providing literacy support at Juniper Hill School for Place-Based Education, which was founded by her daughter, Anne Stires, in 2010.