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We Can't Wait – Antiracist, Culturally Relevant Read-Alouds

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Connecting Theory to Practice

**We Can't Wait
Antiracist Culturally Relevant
Read-Alouds**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.3.2.11><https://mje.williamwoods.edu/>**Carol Opie****Abstract**

This manuscript examines the urgent need for antiracist, culturally relevant interactive read-alouds in elementary classrooms, particularly given the growing demographic divide between the largely White teaching force and increasingly diverse student populations. Through analysis of existing research and instructive classroom examples, the article demonstrates how thoughtfully selected texts—used as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors—can affirm students' lived experiences, expand their understanding of others, and open space for critical classroom conversations about power and equity. Drawing on scholarship in culturally relevant pedagogy, antiracist education, and literacy studies, the manuscript outlines *promising practices* that teachers can implement across three phases of instructional practice: lesson preparation, instruction, and reflection. These practices include intentionally selecting culturally relevant texts, centering students' voices, animating the voices of underrepresented students and their contributions, scaffolding background knowledge, and addressing issues of race, gender, and social justice through discussion. Although empirical research on antiracist, culturally relevant read-alouds remains limited, this article synthesizes the available literature to offer actionable strategies teachers can use now. Ultimately, this work argues that read-aloud routines—long a staple in elementary classrooms—hold powerful potential to disrupt inequities, nurture students' critical consciousness, and cultivate joyful, inclusive, academically rigorous learning environments. Our students can't wait, and neither can we.

Keywords

Antiracist, Culturally Relevant, Elementary Literacy, Read-Alouds

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Introduction

Our students need antiracist, culturally relevant read-alouds. Yet as teachers, sometimes we don't know where to begin. And sometimes curriculums mandated by school districts or the political climate in which we teach make it challenging. Still, it is important to teach using texts as mirrors which reflect our students' experiences (Bishop, 1990) because "when children do not regularly see themselves in texts, they lose interest in reading" (Enriquez, 2021, p. 103). It is also important for students, especially those from the dominant culture, to experience books as windows and sliding glass doors which provide students a way to be exposed to worlds that are different from theirs (Bishop, 1990). Bishop's (1990) framework of windows and mirrors assists teachers in selecting culturally relevant books and in assessing how well the books reflected their students' lived experiences.

A few years ago, I was teaching online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I attempted to teach a small group of mostly Latino/a fifth graders from working-class backgrounds to read *Miami Jackson Makes the Play* (McKissack et al., 2004). While most of my students had roughly the same shade of brown skin as the illustrated boy on the book's cover, presumably Miami Jackson, that seemed to be where the similarities ended. Notably, my students had very different life experiences than the characters in the book. Unlike the characters, baseball and summer camps were unfamiliar to them. I failed at providing a mirror into my students' lives. When selecting texts, we can keep in mind that "close approximations are not good enough. They are foggy mirrors that reflect only vague contours of the identities and lived experiences that comprise a child's reality" (Enriquez, 2021, p. 104). I then tried to change course and make this text a window into my students' experiences, and teach about baseball and summer camps, but in this case, I didn't succeed for several reasons. I think with more time and planning, it may have been possible.

I selected this book for reasons I suspect many teachers can relate to. The major reason I chose it was because it was a part of our curriculum. Secondly, it was at the students' level. (For more on why you may want to reconsider leveled reading instruction and encourage your district to reconsider curriculums with leveled reading instruction, see *Limiting Children to Books They Can Already Read*, 2023). Lastly, it was designated as "humor" and I knew my students liked that! However, since they did not connect with the characters or situations in the book, they didn't find it funny. The book's sarcasm and irony fell flat. Like most teachers, I was doing the best I could with the knowledge and the resources I had at the time. And like most teachers, I wanted to do better for my students. But how?

Imagine walking into a 4th and 5th grade classroom in a school in the Southwest in the United States with a student population where "91% are Mexican American, 8% are African American, and fewer than 1% are White. Thirty-four percent speak a language other than English as their primary language" (May, 2011, p. 10). The teacher, Gail, (pseudonym) is a White woman, as are the majority of U.S. public school teachers (Will, 2020). Gail is reading "an informational picture book about Día de los Muertos, a Mexican and Mexican American cultural celebration observed by many of [her] students" (May, 2011, p. 13). It isn't long before a student shares out a personal connection with the text, then another, and another. Gail stops at certain points and the students and teacher discuss the ideas in the informational text. Sure enough, more students chime in with personal connections from their lives and connections which allow them to make meaning as readers. At times, the teacher is "animating" the text and "animating" the voices of her students, which allows students who are sometimes underrepresented to have their voices uplifted

and to guide all students to keep on topic. When I refer to underrepresented students, I mean those whose identities and experiences are often overlooked or marginalized in curriculum and schooling.

The animating framework is important because the socialization of language is one way that social inequities are perpetuated, and animating in this way during interactive read-alouds supports students to think critically and supports teachers to think from an asset, rather than a deficit lens (May, 2011). “Animating” is different from “speaking”, because animating refers to voicing the words of another person, such as the author of a text or the students in a class. A *speaker* means the words originate from the person doing the speaking. When the teacher repeats the students’ words, she is animating those words. As the teacher continues to read, most students share and show they are engaged. At various talk turns, Gail advocates for students by animating their voices, facilitates the classroom interactions, and teaches or models reading strategies (May, 2011).

When teachers know our students well, we can select texts that relate to their lives and mirror their lived experiences, as this teacher did. Yet proceed with caution, because “if we present students with foggy mirrors, we might also be stereotyping them and their families” (Enriquez, 2021, p. 105). We can also scaffold those texts that are different from our students’ lives or lived experiences by providing relevant background information and those texts then may serve as windows or sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). Again, use caution, because “if that window is limited in size and scope, how much of a view does it actually provide” (Enriquez, 2021, p. 104)? Like Gail, we can animate students’ voices to align student talk with the topic, elevate students’ voices, and teach reading comprehension during antiracist, culturally relevant read-alouds.

What Are Interactive Read-alouds?

In the most basic sense, interactive read-alouds mean teachers and students are engaging intentionally in discussions about a book while reading it out loud. Many teachers and caregivers are familiar with interactive read-alouds and use them frequently. They can be used to teach specific skills, build students’ vocabulary, and provide students opportunities to share about the text’s themes and ideas (Weippert, 2020). Teachers both intentionally preplan questions that are typically open-ended and follow the lead of students’ questions and comments in the discussion. Read-alouds are ubiquitous, valuable teaching tools that can be leveraged for antiracist, culturally relevant instruction, in addition to teaching reading.

Why Antiracist, Culturally Relevant Interactive Read-alouds?

Beginning in the earliest years of schooling, there is an urgent need to disrupt systemic inequities and oppression (“Reflecting on Anti-Bias Education in Action,” 2021; May, 2011). This is the case, particularly given the demographics of our current public school student population in the United States and the mismatch between the demographics of our educators and our public-school students (May, 2011). Over 85% of teachers identified as White while over 50% of students are people of Color (Ohito, 2016). One way to create space for dialogues about dismantling racism and other -isms is through classroom read-alouds of culturally relevant texts (May, 2011). Such instruction has the potential to teach students how to interrogate and interrupt these inequities while increasing their engagement in school and improving their reading comprehension.

Gloria Ladson-Billings' work has had a lasting and powerful impact on education. Her concept of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is widely used in classrooms, teacher preparation programs, and education research today (Paris & Alim, 2017). At its heart, CRP is about more than helping students do well academically. Ladson-Billings describes it as an approach that supports students' learning while also honoring their cultural identities and encouraging them to think critically about unfair systems and practices in schools and society (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three key ideas: helping students achieve academically, valuing and sustaining their cultural knowledge and ways of being, and developing students' capacity to recognize and challenge injustice. CRP is essential to the academic success of African American students and other children who have not been fully supported by public schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

"Antiracist scholars describe how an antiracist curriculum must center Black, brown, and Indigenous people's genius and joy" (Vlach, 2022, p. 34). Antiracist education as theorized by scholars of Color does not start with teaching oppression (Leonardo, 2002). Following this definition, antiracist read-alouds include texts, instruction, and discussion which also center this joy and genius. Antiracist read-alouds can be used to teach students to critically analyze texts and oppressive systems.

Culturally relevant texts "by definition provide cultural mirrors into the cultural and personal experiences of the reader (Ebe, 2012)" (Marquez & Colby, 2021, p. 206). Yet culturally relevant read-alouds extend beyond text selection and require that teachers know their students well and co-develop critical consciousness with them (Marquez & Colby, 2021). Codeveloping critical consciousness means that the teacher is not centered as the expert and instead learns together with students, to critically question racial, gender, class, and other roles in texts and in the world. Culturally relevant pedagogy can be defined as "an instructional approach in which teachers hold all students to high academic expectations while providing a context valuing of students and where they come from (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995)" (May, 2011, pp. 4–5).

Bringing this all together, antiracist, culturally relevant interactive read-alouds are discussions about culturally relevant texts which center people of Color's joy and genius, have high academic expectations for all students, mirror students' experiences both culturally and personally – or provide windows into different experiences, particularly for students in the dominant culture such as White, middle-class students, and can be used to teach students how to analyze systems of oppression and inequity. When I refer to dominant culture, I mean cultural norms and perspectives that are centered as the default in schools, while other ways of knowing and living are minimized or excluded. These norms and perspectives are often rooted in whiteness and middle-class ways of being.

Putting Antiracist, Culturally Relevant Interactive Read-Alouds Into Action

Unfortunately, there is very little empirical research on antiracist, culturally relevant read-alouds. However, I will provide some promising practices from the small body of research that does exist. As you take these practices into consideration, please bear in mind that they are drawn from a small research base. I share them despite this fact, because I believe it is important to move forward the best we can with what we *do* know. The promising practices include lesson preparation, instruction, and reflection.

Lesson Preparation

To apply the culturally relevant pedagogy and the mirrors and windows frameworks, one promising practice teachers can try is to mirror students' experiences in texts (Bakhoda et al., 2022; Cho & Christ, 2022; Marquez & Colby, 2021; Pilonieta & Hancock, 2012; Worthy et al., 2013). Here are some examples of how a few teachers put this into action in their classrooms.

Set Intentional Instructional Goals to be Antiracist and Culturally Relevant

It stands to reason that teaching in an antiracist and culturally relevant way won't happen by accident and will likely require intention, in addition to ongoing reflection and self-assessment. As described above, May (2011) observed one fourth/ fifth grade teacher, Gail, for two consecutive years who enacted culturally responsive teaching during nonfiction read-alouds when she strived for cultural relevance. Gail got to know her students, selected texts relevant to their lives, and led discussions that centered students' ideas. In two other classrooms in Texas, Vlach (2011) noticed that two teachers she observed had the intention to disrupt the dominant story of the United States with her students through their daily read-aloud routine. She also noticed that working towards these instructional goals began well before the read-aloud itself; it began with planning. Planning includes getting to know students from the first day of class and reading children's literature as much as possible, with an eye for your particular students. As a way to extend the windows and mirrors framework, Enriquez (2021) made the following suggestions to integrate diverse books meaningfully throughout the year, not just the special focus of the month. The curriculum and our instruction should:

Assess the scope of multicultural learning in the curriculum. Is there one "world cultures" unit or is the concept of world cultures woven throughout the entire year's curriculum? Similarly, is there a single "multicultural literature" unit, or is diverse literature part of every unit you teach? Make diverse books our core read-alouds throughout the year. In doing so, we teach students that "diversity is a way to honor both the distinctiveness of our identities and our participation in the human experience." (Enriquez, 2019, p. 30)

Supplement and/or Replace Our Core Unit Books

When teaching a unit on the American Revolution, are books about revolutions in other countries also included, some of which are more recent and current for students, to provide a more global context and perspective? Does a unit on conservation and the environment also weave in books such as *Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa* (Winter, 2018) and *We are Water Protectors* (Lindstrom, 2020) (Enriquez, 2021, p. 105)?

Know Students' Backgrounds to Create Culturally Relevant Learning Experiences for and With Them

For example, our teacher in the Southwest knew her students and knew that many of them observed Día de los Muertos. Therefore, when they did the read-aloud of the informational text about it, students could connect. In order to find books that match your students' backgrounds, you can get to know your students in many ways. Teachers often begin the school year with surveys. You can also get to know them through their writing as well through meeting with their families. And of course, sharing about yourself while also

asking questions you sincerely want to learn the answers to is a wonderful way to build relationships. “If we truly want to share books as mirrors, we need to take the time to know who students are in as many ways as possible” (Enriquez, 2021, p. 104). As you read more and more children’s literature, you can connect that with your knowledge of your students.

Adopt a Social Justice Stance and Teach Anti-Bias Picture Books

Nguyen (2022) found an indicated need for early childhood teachers to adopt a social justice stance while teaching, including using more anti-bias picture books to lead discussions on interrupting -isms and supporting students' activism. Adopting a social justice stance means believing in fair treatment of all, identifying bias and inequities, and working to change them. Teaching with such a stance means reflecting this in your instructional practices, such as leading discussions about inequities in texts.

Select texts where students’ experiences, not just cultural but also social, are mirrored. While teaching *Mango, Abuela, and Me* (Medina & Dominguez, 2015), students started singing the song *Los Pollitos* and sharing about their experiences and memories of the song. In this one classroom, students also shared about their family and cultural experiences with empanadas when Abuela made them in the book (Marquez & Colby, 2021). As teachers, it is joyful to witness our students connect to the experiences of characters in books. Marquez & Colby (2012) explored the interactions with culturally relevant texts of fourth grade students in a dual language setting in central Texas. Students were engaged when they made personal connections with the text to their Latino/a heritage and to current political issues affecting them. They were less able to connect when experiences in the text were different from their own.

Instruction

Make Student Talk the Focus

During culturally relevant read-alouds, the quality of teacher talk may be more important than the quantity. In your planning, execution, and reflection on classroom interactive read-alouds, you can consider how your high-quality teacher talk can best support students’ discussion and critical thinking. Considering that, along with the suggestions below, may support you to apply the animating framework.

Be a Cultural Advocate by Animating Contributions of Underrepresented Students

Remember our teacher who became an *animator* of her students during their read-alouds. This teacher was voicing, or animating, the words of others, especially those who were often underrepresented, during informational text read-alouds (May, 2011). This provides opportunities for students’ contributions to be valued.

Support Students to Express Critical Thinking About Issues of Equity and Power

Nguyen (2022) found kindergarten students expressing critical thinking about issues of equity and power when the teacher in her study addressed these issues using multicultural texts. She found that the students could participate in thoughtful interactions during anti-bias read-aloud sessions and showed their complex understanding of race and gender issues (Nguyen, 2022).

Position Students as Experts

As a way to increase engagement in read-alouds, teachers can privilege students' lived experiences and position them as experts (May, 2011). It is important not to place a burden on students by putting them in a position to speak for large groups of people, such as an entire race, ethnicity or religion. The more you get to know your students and learn what they are experts in, the better you will be able to position them as experts. And we are all experts on our own lives.

Engage in High-Quality Teacher Talk

Asking good, higher-order, open-ended questions is important during interactive read-alouds, but it is not the only thing that is important. High-quality teacher talk focuses on promoting students' ideas. By definition, teacher talk plays a large role in all classroom read-alouds. It is probably not a surprise to teachers that May (2011) found that it is not only the amount of teacher talk that matters, but also the originations and content of that talk. Likewise, findings from Kim et al. (2016) indicate that reading literature should be used to explore real-life problems, including those related to race, with young students. The following are a few ways to try engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy, by engaging in high-quality teacher talk.

Encourage Young Students to Freely Share Their Views About Diverse Social Issues by Creating a Space Where Students Feel Secure in Exchanging Different Views

Reading is a social act and cultural diversity ought to be viewed as an opportunity rather than a problem (Lee, 2020). To create a more supportive literacy learning environment, teachers should understand how profoundly students' social and cultural environments affect their reading practices (Kim et al., 2016). This will likely include building classroom culture and relationships – with and among students – from day one in class and throughout the school year. You can also think about how the physical environment impacts their learning. Are students distracted by hunger or the need for physical activity? Is something going on at home that affects students' learning?

Lead Discussions on Interrupting -Isms and Supporting Students' Activism

Most students have a sense of what is fair and what is unfair. As you get to know your students better, you can find read-aloud books about issues and -isms important to them. You can start by finding out more about topics dear to them such as, possibly, fairness at recess. As an example, you could have students brainstorm actions they might take to make sharing the swings fairer. Then you can move on to more global issues in books and relate, to the extent that makes sense, to previous conversations, such as about who gets to use the swings. Consider your own positionality – race, sex, class, gender, able-bodiedness, religion, etc. and how these different parts of your identity impact you, your life, and teaching. I am a White woman so, for example, I have many unearned privileges from being White and can face discrimination as a woman. As you share freely, listen openly, and model disrupting when students perpetuate stereotypes and racist myths, your students will likely feel freer to share. In a kindergarten class, there was a noticeable change in kindergarteners' racial attitudes as they read multicultural books and had discussions about them (Kim et al., 2016).

Disrupt Anti-Blackness, Anti-Immigrant, Racial/Gender and Other Discriminatory Stances or Actions

Disrupt or intervene when students express anti-immigrant, anti-Blackness, and racial/gender discriminatory stances or take such actions. In the same study I just referred to, set in South Korea, students internalized and enacted anti-immigrant, anti-Blackness, and racial/gender discriminatory actions to which the early childhood teacher often failed to either disrupt or intervene (Nguyen, 2022). In the same study I just referred to, set in South Korea, students internalized and enacted anti-immigrant, anti-Blackness, and racial/gender discriminatory actions to which the early childhood teacher often failed to either disrupt or intervene (Nguyen, 2022). These omissions or failures of teachers, or others, to act are common and are in no way limited to the referenced study or the particular setting of that study. This is, however, an example where the researcher shared openly about this unfortunately common phenomenon. It may be helpful to role-play potential scenarios with other teachers beforehand and to critically analyze situations afterwards, with an eye for how to do better next time. This is often not addressed, or not thoroughly enough, in teacher preparation programs or in-service teacher professional development. I believe we would do well to change this.

Provide Student Feedback and Support Comprehension-Building

Student feedback and comprehension-building are important, not just questions. Here are some suggested ways to provide feedback, along with how these actions might specifically support comprehension: (a) reiteration/modeling were related to students expressing developed factual knowledge, (b) clarification/extension were related to students expressing developed opinions, (c) clarification/ agreement were related to students expressing developed inferences (Bakhoda et al., 2022).

Provide Contextual Background About Texts

Especially when books are more windows than mirrors and do not mirror students' experiences, it can be important to scaffold the reading of such texts by providing background historical, cultural, vocabulary, and other information. One example of providing this scaffolding occurred in a small school in a suburban setting in central Texas, when the teacher provided contextual background, the process of reading and discussing fictive narratives about the life experiences of Latino/a's cultivated the students' empathetic considerations for others (Marquez & Colby, 2021).

Reflection

Antiracist, culturally relevant interactive read-alouds center people of Color's joy and genius, have high academic expectations for all students, mirror students' experiences both culturally and personally, and can be used to teach students how to interrupt systems of oppression and inequity. Teachers and researchers, in the small body of empirical research available on this topic, found some of the above promising practices to open more opportunities for more students to participate in read-alouds by intentionally aiming to make the read-alouds antiracist and culturally relevant. Teachers used students' funds of knowledge, or skills or knowledge students bring from home and learn from their families, to include and engaged more students.

Read-alouds are a staple of most elementary school classrooms. The current political climate for schools sometimes restricts the teaching of non-dominant perspectives and shining a light on inequities, claiming

that this inhibits the dominant group's free speech rights. Even so, in this climate, teachers can and do find ways to make their daily literacy routines, including read-alouds, a space to disrupt and challenge inequities. For example, two teachers in Texas, which has an arguably restrictive climate for teachers and schools, used their read-aloud routines to have students question the dominant story of the U.S. as an equitable place (Vlach, 2022).

Below are some suggested reflection questions. You can also create your own, based on your particular circumstances and your particular students. You can also get feedback from your students about how to improve for the next antiracist, culturally relevant read-aloud. Here are some questions to get you started:

- Who was participating? In what ways were they participating? Were they sharing about their own experiences, and how they connected or not? Analyzing the text? Interpreting it? Adding on to others' comments? Agreeing or disagreeing with others? How can I get more students to participate in meaningful ways? Here are some talk moves sentence starters that may be helpful: https://wpvip.edutopia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Talk_Moves_2_UP.pdf.
- Whose voices did I animate? What seemed to be the effect of that? Whose voices did I not animate? How can I improve for next time?
- Did I disrupt anti-Blackness, anti-immigrant, racial/gender and other discriminatory stances or actions, even if that caused me to experience discomfort? How so? If not, is this a conversation I should circle back to with my students? If so, how should I approach that? You may want to talk this out with a trusted peer or a mentor and come up with a plan. If you decide this is a situation that makes sense to circle back to, this could be a good opportunity to model vulnerability as a teacher. You can do so by pointing out that we all make mistakes and modeling how you are attempting to correct this one. And know that there is not one right way to do this work. The important thing is to keep working at it and reflecting to do better next time.
- Were the texts mirrors for students' experiences? How so? If not, did I provide scaffolding such as background information to support students to experience the texts successfully as windows? You can find information about children's texts online such as at the Horn Book Inc., <https://www.hbook.com/>, We Need Diverse Books, <https://diversebooks.org/>, and the Diverse Book Finder Database, <https://diversebookfinder.org/books>.

I suggest making your own reflective questions and finding your own reflective practices. This is challenging work. But remember, our students can't wait and we can't wait. The time is now to embrace antiracist, culturally relevant teaching, including read-alouds. And here are some promising practices to try out as you continue on your journey.

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