

# Thinker, Learner, and Practitioner: Using an Insider's Lens to Explore Critical, Cultural, and Global Consciousness Through Multicultural Literature

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Résumé de l'article

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# ***THINKER, LEARNER, AND PRACTITIONER: USING AN INSIDER'S LENS TO EXPLORE CRITICAL, CULTURAL, AND GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE***

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## *Abstract*

Literacy research highlights a need to explore the way literacy is used in the classroom and how current practices engage students with aspects of humanity and social justice. This doctoral research took place as a classroom inquiry that examined the potential for multicultural literature to expand adolescent learners' worldviews and shape their perceptions as global citizens. From a constant stance of reflexivity, this teacher researcher recalls a dynamic eighth-grade language arts classroom as they engaged with multicultural books and real-life events, before and during a pandemic. This paper focuses on select themes and subthemes emerging from pedagogical practices used in the classroom throughout the study. Notions of time, space, place, and identity detail an intentional and purposeful pedagogy as learners interacted with literacy within and beyond their classroom community.

*Keywords:* critical literacy, classroom practices, teacher research, multicultural literature, social justice education, global citizenship, pedagogy, critical consciousness, cultural consciousness, global consciousness

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* articulates that education should benefit the full development of the human personality, and aim for "understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups" (The United Nations, 1948, art. 26, para. 2). When I began my career as an educator, this fundamental human right resonated with me, and I wanted to contribute to such humanistic educational goals. Yet, criteria like economic growth and material wealth are what tend to define success and well-being in our society, while systems of education continue to advance educational agendas that value productivity over empathy (Nussbaum, 2010). Humanity faces unprecedented challenges due to a hastened globalization process; as such, our students are required to navigate a complex world and a rapidly changing society. Broader education goals are needed to prepare students for such a world, where they can learn to respect others' values and perspectives, care about the well-being of their community, develop a sense of purpose and responsibility in shaping their own lives and contribute to the lives of others, and exercise agency (Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws from the author's doctoral research, completed at the Schulich School of Education, Nipissing University.

After more than a decade in the classroom, it occurred to me that such broad education goals do not automatically fit into a formalized and structured public school system. I noticed a disparity between the goals we have identified for a more sustainable education in the twenty-first century, and the pedagogical practices we implement in our classrooms. As I began to question this gap from the viewpoint of a language arts teacher, I wondered about students' perceptions, preconceptions, and attitudes in a classroom community where multiculturalism was unfamiliar. How were they engaging with language and literacy and making meaning as they constructed their own understanding of global citizenship? I pondered whether learners identified as real actors in the story of the world and considered how they could speak, write, and act themselves into that story rather than observe from a distance. How might the story world teach about the real world in a space where human character and potentiality are considered through compassion? I became curious about the way notions like time, space, place, and identity move and interact among a classroom community as the world, near and far, undergoes constant shifts and changes. To explore these questions further, I sought to learn how students might envision alternative perspectives, and build their critical, cultural, and global consciousness using multicultural literature in a more organic and democratic learning environment.

#### *Rationale*

According to Bell (2016), diversity and social justice are distinct, yet interdependent terms. Bell associates social justice with the elimination of injustice, which entails the rebuilding of a more inclusive and equitable society. As both a goal and a process, social justice requires us to confront existing ideologies, patterns, and societal pillars that privilege dominant groups to the detriment of the marginalized (Bell, 2016). Social justice encompasses topics that take on issues of equity (Boutte & Muller, 2018; Freire, 1970/2016), and social justice education (SJE) implies the active participation of teachers and students in creating critical, and empowering, teaching and learning environments (Hackman, 2005). As students gain a sense of agency and become committed to the goal of social justice, they begin to see themselves as capable of interrupting structural systems of oppression, and actively contributing to social change (Bell, 2016; Hackman, 2005; Stachowiak, 2017).

Broere and Kerkhoff (2020) suggest that middle level students' cultural and intercultural consciousness needs to be cultivated if productive conversations about sociopolitical and global issues are to take place in the classroom. In addition, the authors explain that since some White students may not consider themselves as cultural beings, they need to develop critical consciousness, which allows them to question society and the role of power and oppression within it. Lastly, Broere and Kerkhoff assert that promoting the development of global consciousness can strengthen students' global awareness from a lens of global citizenship rather than competition, and praise the use of picturebooks, read alouds, and current events to animate conversations about social justice issues. In line with Banks et al. (2001) and Bell (2016), Broere and Kerkhoff suggest that through scaffolded conversations about complex local and global issues, teachers can help students "see themselves as connected to something bigger. . . over time, students can develop the sensitivity and respect needed for civil discourse" (p. 53).

In the same vein, Nussbaum (1997) argues for the power of literature in imagining possible worlds and expressing compassion toward characters experiencing human vulnerability as they face challenges. In a language arts class, literature can offer insights into cultures learners may not have access to, as well as inspire them to become active global citizens who are equipped to ask questions about real-world injustices and prepared to practice empathy in the face of diversity (Choo, 2018).

My research focus is located at the intersection of social justice and literacy. A central question awakened this inquiry: *How might using multicultural literature in the classroom expand adolescent learners' worldviews and shape their perceptions as global citizens?* Kincheloe et al. (2018) suggest that “in the context of reading the word and the world, and problem-posing existing knowledge, critical educators reconceptualize the notion of literacy” (p. 239). What is meant by going beyond simply reading the word? According to Luke (2000), leading students to engage with text critically from intellectual, cultural, social, and political standpoints might prompt the desire to learn to live together ethically and justly. Likewise, multicultural literature might be a way to invite students to look at their own culture and position in the world, and consider others'. Moreover, literature offers a medium for reflection and learning through characters in stories who experience injustices, difficulties, or tragedies because of their differences. Inviting learners to participate in literacy this way aligns with school curricula that strive to promote young learners to “engage in critical analysis of the forces that shape the world” (Kincheloe et al., 2018, p. 239).

The purpose of my doctoral research was to explore the way multicultural literature might go beyond creating a level of interest in students and urge them to be transformed by it. Encountering and engaging with social justice books might inform youth on their own cultural identities and assumptions, encourage an attitude of perspective-taking, and therefore, widen the range of existing worldviews by exploring their critical, cultural, and global consciousness. This paper examines select themes and subthemes emerging from pedagogical practices used in the classroom throughout my teacher inquiry by framing them in notions of time, space, place, and identity.

In the context of this study, the term *global citizenship* is defined as “an umbrella term for social, political, environmental, and economic actions of globally minded individuals and communities on a worldwide scale” (The United Nations, 1948, para. 1). The term *multicultural literature* is used as a pedagogical term rather than as a literary genre. The terminology depicts underrepresented cultures or groups and expands the curriculum to include a more pluralistic view of cultures (Cai & Sims Bishop, 1994), which encompass people who have been marginalized in a variety of ways (Yokota, 2001). I use this term to mean “literature which reflects a power differential between groups created by such things as ethnicity, race, gender, or economics” (Dressel, 2005, p. 754).

### *Theoretical Framework*

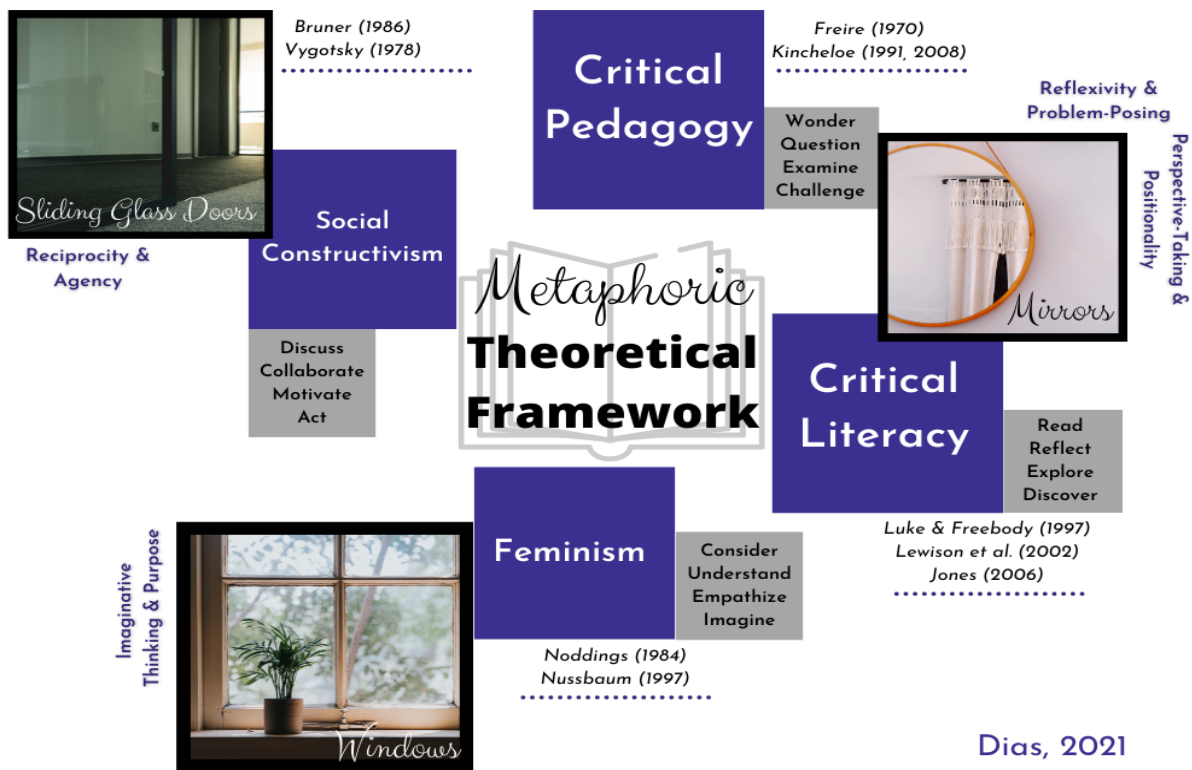
Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) believes that literature can “help us to understand each other better by helping to change our attitudes towards difference” (p. xi). She employs the metaphors of *mirrors*, *windows*, and *sliding glass doors* to describe the issue of cultural authenticity in children’s literature. I draw upon Sims Bishop’s metaphors as a way of visualizing and making sense of my chosen theoretical discourses. While critical pedagogy

and critical literacy remain central to the framework, feminist pedagogies and socioconstructivist theories also guided this classroom research (see Figure 1).

Because there is a need for students to wrestle with ideas and words, reading the word and the world elicits questions like What is? Who benefits? and What if? (Freire, 1970/2016). Asking questions, challenging the status quo, and going beyond receiving knowledge bolsters criticality, which occurs when we examine our own conflicting assumptions. Burbules and Berk (1999) acknowledge this criticality as a valuable tool to navigate through life. This posture also endorses SJE, which seeks to enable students to become conscientious members of their communities through the goals of social responsibility, student empowerment, and the equitable distribution of resources (Bell, 2016). Since my central research question originated from the practical context of my language arts classroom, turning to a set of critical theories was a philosophically natural choice.

First, I conceptualize the critical dimension as connected to mirrors to portray the work of reflexivity from both myself (teacher researcher), and participants (all have been given pseudonyms), as they learned about social justice. In this research, we were fully engaged in looking at ourselves as we are, in the present moment. Looking in the mirror can sometimes be difficult, especially when we begin to recognize that what is reflected

Figure 1. Visual Representation of My Metaphoric Theoretical Framework



back to us does not coincide with what we would like to be. The critical theories in this study require us to ask questions about our beliefs, about what we read, and about our

position, as new knowledge is gained. When we consciously question, examine, and sometimes challenge what we see, it creates opportunities where we might consider alternatives and make decisions about what we see. Once I began exploring criticality as the main frame for my research, I turned to the work of Freire (1970/2016, 1974/2017) and Kincheloe (1991, 2008) to uncover the rationale for endorsing a critical pedagogy approach. This approach anchors the premise of creating conditions for empowerment and social justice in the classroom. The frameworks of Luke and Freebody (1997), Luke (2000), Lewison et al. (2002), and Jones (2006) are added to the critical pedagogies to bring together the theoretical underpinnings of critical literacy. Understanding how critical literacy is enacted in the context of a classroom is an example of how conscientious pedagogical decisions can contribute to bridging the theory to practice gap.

Second, adding perspectives of feminist pedagogies provides a comprehensive dimension to the theoretical underpinnings of my inquiry. Sims Bishop (1990) compares books to windows, in that they sometimes offer “views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange” (p. ix). I liken the second layer of my theoretical framework to windows in two manners. To begin, I visualize it as a way that feminist pedagogy sheds light on my role as a teacher researcher and my vision of the classroom as a liberatory environment. Specifically, I draw on Noddings’ (1984/2013) ethic of care as it relates to my purpose as teacher researcher (carer) who fosters an equitable classroom setting in which students can view (windows) possibilities and other realities presented to them in multicultural literature. Next, I imagine it as a type of looking glass for learners, through which multicultural literature allows them to contemplate possibilities and realities different from their own. In addition, Nussbaum’s (1997) notion of the narrative imagination allowed me to approach my teaching and learning in a way that sustains feminist values from the perspective of cultivating humanity.

Third, Sims Bishop (1990) imagines the windows of her metaphor as sometimes transforming into sliding glass doors, a realm within which “readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author” (p. ix). To break the potential barrier mentioned earlier, she visualizes sliding glass doors as “a way to suggest that a book can offer what Rosenblatt (1978) called a lived experience for a reader” (Sims Bishop, 2012, p. 9). The final layer of my theoretical framework sits within this sliding glass doors metaphor to imply motivation, engagement, and action from the part of readers as they contemplate alternate possibilities. I draw upon Bruner’s (1986) work on narrative as a mode of thought and storytelling and Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, which considers social interactions and relationships as important elements in learning and development.

### *Methodology*

I pursued a qualitative teacher research methodology to explore “in the constant flux and flow of classroom life and culture in order to generate new possibilities” (Campano, 2009, pp. 332-333). I framed my teacher research inquiry in a single case study, defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit” (pp. 232-233). In this case study, the social unit (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) consisted of eighth-grade students’ experiences within one language arts

class. This social unit became a case of some particular phenomenon (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), defined in my research as teaching and learning with multicultural literature.

The ways in which we see the world are largely influenced by our location in it, thereby entangling notions of time, space, place, and identity. As a practitioner, I often wondered about the extent to which students view themselves as active members of a larger, global community, especially in a context where there is little ethnic and racial diversity. Working on understanding my own attitudes, values, and biases helped gain deeper insight into my qualitative inquiry (Patnaik, 2013), and I felt compelled to develop a similar social and cultural awareness, and critical curiosity in my students. By using my research questions as a starting point, I acquired what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) call an “inquiry stance” toward my teaching practice, one that was “critical and transformative” (p. 46) and linked to social justice.

As a language arts teacher, this methodology allowed for an intimate relationship between theory and practice, thereby offering a space in which literacy could be redefined, and literacy practices, reinvented (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Simon et al., 2012). Lytle (2008) defines teacher research as a passionate, political, and even radical act in which teacher researchers’ primary goal is to teach better. Because of the unique, direct educational context in which teacher researchers work daily, their theorizing processes inform new practices and open possibilities for their students (Simon & Campano, 2013). According to Cochran-Smith, teacher research is a broader stance exhibited by good teachers who are always thinking, critiquing, and examining underlying assumptions (Krutka & Milton, 2017). By adopting this inquiry stance (problem-posing) on diversity, it allows for the problematization of concepts like culture, language, and power (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In this sense, I undertook to negotiate the borders of research and educational practice, and aspired to “rethink practice, question [my] own assumptions, and challenge the status quo” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2011, p. 18).

### *Multicultural Texts Used for Teaching and Learning*

During the year of this study, I implemented a topics-oriented, yearlong multicultural book study. Everyday teaching and learning activities included units that focused on different multicultural novels. Each multicultural unit included one focus novel study accompanied by supporting picture books. I selected texts for their social justice potential, based partly on recommendations from the *National Council of Teachers of English* (2018) as well as the Social Justice Books project from *Teaching for Change* (n.d.). Because I was mindful about portraying characters and situations in realistic, credible, and authentic ways, I consulted a website powered by the University of Arizona, which provides a list of criteria on how to evaluate the authenticity of books (Worlds of Words, 2020).

The first novel I introduced was *The Epic Fail of Arturo Zamora* (Cartaya, 2017), a story featuring a Cuban American boy named Arturo and his extended family, who must face challenges regarding the survival of the family restaurant which has been at the centre of their lives and their community for decades. This story, told from the perspective of a teenager, depicts themes like love, family, tradition, community, gentrification, and youth activism. *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000/2015) and its sequel *Parvana’s Journey* (Ellis, 2002/2015) comprised our second and third novel studies. *The Breadwinner* begins when

a young girl named Parvana, living under the strict and unjust rules of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, watches as her father is violently taken from their home. As the rest of the family struggles to survive, she must disguise herself as a boy, and become the sole breadwinner. In *Parvana's Journey*, as Parvana's mother and siblings are missing, she must continue her journey to find them, alone, after the death of her father. Some passages from both these books are fragments of actual stories from Afghani women who were interviewed by Ellis in refugee camps. We read our next novel, *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018) during the last week of in-class learning before school closures were imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It tells the story of Jerome, an African American boy shot by a White police officer who mistakes his toy gun for a real one. Told in a back-and-forth timeline where the protagonist witnesses the devastating consequences of his killing from "Dead" and "Alive" viewpoints, the narrative weaves in historical and sociopolitical elements. As Jerome meets other ghost boys like Emmett Till, he tries to make sense of his death as the story serves up a scathing portrayal of racism and police brutality, still present in our current society.

For our final multicultural unit study, I revised my original plan of reading one single book as students did not have access to their individual copies because of the remote learning situation. I chose to offer students options from a list of books. They selected the following: *Harbor Me* (Woodson, 2018), *Stella by Starlight* (Draper, 2015), *Allies* (Gratz, 2019), *A Bird on Water Street* (Dulemba, 2014), and *It Ain't So Awful, Falafel!* (Dumas, 2017). Some were eBooks and others were prerecorded read alouds, shared via Google Classroom, with the authors' permissions.

#### *Research Site/Participants*

This study took place in a French public high school located in a small town of Eastern Ontario, with a population of approximately 12,000 people. The student population is largely representative of the community, which is mostly Francophone, White, and of North American or European descent. At the time of recruitment, one English as a second language (ESL) class of twenty students provided a convenience sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), from which twelve participants assented to share their experiences at the end of the year, and whose parents/guardians consented as well. Participants consisted of six male and six female French-speaking students, ranging between 13 and 14 years old, enrolled in our ESL class where we met for three, 60-minute periods per week.

#### *Data Collection*

Students participated in everyday teaching and learning activities in the classroom, as already occurring. Classroom activities were the same for everyone and were not specially planned for this project. Data was gleaned from three research methods: my teacher journal, students' reflective questionnaires (end of year), and student portfolios (spanning the whole year).

Two distinct phases of data collection took place. In the initial phase of gathering data, I used a teacher journal, which is an account of classroom life and a practice regularly used by teachers. The purpose of my teacher journal was to reflect on the pedagogical practices taking place in my ESL class, that I could then re-examine and analyze at the end of the school year. Journal entries included thoughts on my practice, descriptions of my



pedagogical approaches using multicultural literature, and questions I had as a teacher. The journal was not evaluative of students in any way and did not identify specific learners by name. At times, I referred generally to ideas shared by groups of students during collaborative discussions, or the ways in which learners as a whole were connecting, or not connecting, with characters in the stories. In the second phase of the inquiry, participants were invited to respond to a year-end, reflective questionnaire. Designed for written response by participants, it featured ten open-ended questions pertaining to their experience with multicultural literature throughout the year. A French and English version was offered to allow students to answer in their preferred language. During this phase, participants were also invited to share their student portfolios, a reflective tool designed to include an array of learning materials ranging from dialogue journals, short reader response tasks, artwork, and culminating projects in relation to each novel. Students had used them to compile samples of their work in ESL, which they could revisit to observe their growth and learning.

#### *Data Analysis*

A qualitative approach to data analysis best suited the nature of my teacher research, one that recognizes that along with description, the data analysis process also implicates some interpretation in the selection of research outcomes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The first stage of my analysis was ongoing as I continuously reflected upon my teaching practice and wrote in my teacher journal. Then, the stage of initial discovery included the process of memo writing and open coding. Preliminary codes led to identification of potential categories, 33 of which were generated initially. I *unitized* the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and created a discovery wall using colour codes, sticky notes, and chart paper. I repeated this process for each set of data. I proceeded with an inductive analysis of the data, using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) *constant comparative method*, which combines the act of coding while simultaneously comparing all units of meaning obtained. Four steps within this method enabled me to zoom out, look at the categories that surfaced from each set of data, and begin to see patterns.

Themes and subthemes began to emerge from the data, as I continued with the dynamic work of finding relationships among them, and associating *outcome propositions* for each (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). This thematic analysis provided an opportunity for me to examine the perspectives of my participants as well as my own, and notice similarities and differences. Throughout this analysis process, my understanding of the phenomenon increased, and research outcomes began to take shape.

#### *Duality of Roles/Identity*

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) contend that duality of roles enhances participation in the inquiry process because “the borders between inquiry and practice are crossed, and the boundaries between being a researcher and being a practitioner are blurred” (p. 94). My interpretive frameworks as a practitioner equipped me with what Cochran-Smith and Lytle call a “truly emic view” (p. 18) that differs from an outside observer. By enacting the roles of both teacher and researcher in my own classroom environment, I gained the kind of knowledge that comes from being emotionally involved, sharing the perspectives of my students, and therefore, being able to empathize with them (Diesing, 1971).

Engaging in a study that purposely sought to examine worldviews, and critically explore issues of social justice, forecasted an unpredictable journey of self-reflection for both myself and my students. When addressing tough topics like race, privilege, gender inequality, etc., making visible our own racial identities becomes “part of the research process itself that must be theorized and interrogated along with other data” (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, p. 12). As a White woman, taking stock of my sociocultural identity was a significant part of engaging in this inquiry with my students. Glesne (2011) reminds us that by writing ourselves into the story of our research, we acknowledge that what we know about our research is entwined with what we know about ourselves. The reflexive character of my inquiry exposes the notion that as a researcher, my “effort to understand others’ understandings is mediated by [my] own professional, personal, and collective knowledge and experiences” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 82). This reflexive work was crucial as I surveyed my sense of personal identity as a teacher and researcher in this study.

### *Findings*

As themes emerged, I noticed that they naturally diverged into three lenses (see Figure 2). The first lens considers the data as a whole within the context of the classroom to contextualize students’ experiences with multicultural literature. Each subsequent lens narrows in focus with the second offering my perspective as teacher, and the third presenting three distinct participant portraits. This paper focuses on select themes and subthemes emerging in the second lens, which connect to notions of time, space, place, and identity as I made pedagogical decisions about literacy practices in the classroom. Specifically, in relation to the concept of time, I elaborate on the subthemes of re-evaluating purpose, exploring historical context, and connecting to current events. In the scope of space, I describe engaging with tough topics and journal writing as significant subthemes emerging from the data. Nurturing relationships was a subtheme connected to the notion of place, and the concept of identity surfaced in the emerging theme of allyship.

### *Time*

During the 2019-2020 school year, my students and I experienced the beginning of a global pandemic. Unprecedented and disconcerting, this moment in time imparted a new age of pedagogical resiliency and ingenuity. Despite the switch to remote teaching and learning, I discovered that our multicultural book studies were a rallying point for us. The constant reflexive attitude on my teaching practice led me to modify my original plan for teaching with multicultural novels. After reading an article about *re-evaluating purpose* during the pandemic, I noted: “It made me think about this out-of-the-ordinary situation we are in with our students being at home and incorporating learning where they are” (Teacher Journal, April 19, 2020). Sensing the urge to respect my commitment to an organic and democratically inclined classroom (though virtually), I revamped my original booklist to include new options to choose from in the final unit of study. I prepared a short Google Forms survey that included the book choices, along with a brief description for each book, to which students had responded so enthusiastically.

Figure 2. Overview of the Three Lenses

First Lens	Second Lens	Third Lens
<b>Empathy</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Developing Critical Awareness: The Value of Empathy</li> <li>○ Engaging in Perspective-Taking: The Power of Empathy</li> <li>○ <i>Homo Empathicus</i>: The Nature of Empathy</li> </ul>	<b>Pedagogical Practices to Teach About the World</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Adopting a Stance of Constant Inquiry</li> <li>○ Engaging With Tough Topics</li> <li>○ Exploring Historical Context</li> <li>○ Connecting to Current Events</li> <li>○ Journal Writing as an Ongoing Practice</li> <li>○ Utilizing Picturebooks</li> <li>○ Fostering Multimodal Response Options</li> </ul>	<b>Amber</b> (Passion)
<b>Insight</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Learning From Injustice</li> <li>○ Recognizing Privilege</li> <li>○ Understanding Racism</li> <li>○ Bearing Witness</li> </ul>	<b>The Emergence of Allyship</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Joining the Global Conversation</li> <li>○ Sliding Glass Doors: Crossing the Threshold</li> </ul>	<b>Kate</b> (Curiosity)
<b>Agency</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Communicating Through Self-Expression</li> <li>○ Acting for Social Change</li> </ul>	<b>Teaching During a Pandemic</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Embracing an Organic Timeline</li> <li>○ Re-Evaluating Purpose</li> <li>○ Bringing Narrative Alive During Remote Teaching</li> <li>○ Journal Writing as a Way to Stay Connected</li> <li>○ Nurturing Relationships</li> </ul>	<b>Jessie</b> (Wisdom)

*Note.* The present paper focuses on select themes and subthemes emerging from the second lens.

Being offered these choices in a remote learning environment seemed to hit the right note with students. Like most changes, this modification required some level of compromise. After doing the legwork—communicating with authors to request copyright permissions for read alouds, surveying my students on their opinions for this idea, compiling their book selections, and rallying some help to read and record the read alouds—we finally inaugurated our diversified, multicultural novel studies with which to end our ESL classroom journey, despite the pandemic.

Our classroom community was also impacted by the timeliness of real-life injustices unravelling in the news. In May 2020, events following the tragedy of George Floyd’s murder in the news created opportunities for learners to connect actual racism to stories and characters with whom they had empathized. Of all the injustices that arose during our readings, racism proved to be the most outstanding, as demonstrated in the data. I reflected:

The issue of racism has surfaced in an unprecedented way just in the past week and for me, a mirrors/windows/sliding glass doors metaphor has never been more relevant and alive. (Teacher Journal, June 1, 2020)

Throughout the study, my students had become emboldened to be a part of the fight against racism. In her year-end survey, “Amber” asked: “How are we to build a community that will create change if we haven’t been taught to do it?”

Contextualizing learning by *connecting to current events* in real time became an essential component in utilizing multicultural literature as a classroom tool and became

prevalent in my pedagogical practices. It was noticeable that current events coalesced with our multicultural novels in a very organic and dynamic fashion. When asked what advice he would give to other teachers who might be interested in using multicultural literature with their students, “Andrew” responded, “to make sure to show videos or articles about what goes on in the books as well as in real life simultaneously, that way we can make connections.” The benefits of adding this layer to learners’ activities and discussions provided a useful bridge for further understanding of controversial issues. Every time I shared an article or video, I invited learners to read the post, think about their position in relation to the issue at hand, connect it to the characters and events in the novels, and prepare to share with their peers.

As my students and I pursued our discussions about social justice debates in the news, they circled back to the authenticity component of their learning, many of them confirming in their dialogue journals “that the authors of their book did not make any effort to gloss over truth or reality and students noted they were glad for that fact” (Teacher Journal, May 21, 2020). Aside from heightening their level of critical awareness and providing opportunities for them to converse about issues of inequity on a global level, it seemed my students took more ownership of their education by engaging in their own quest for knowledge.

Time was also instrumental through the provision of *historical contexts* during this study. I recognized the multidisciplinary perspectives approach (language arts + social studies) I had adopted in my classroom as critical pedagogy, a pivotal standpoint when I navigated through the books with my students. For instance, *Parvana’s Journey* abounded with examples of children’s rights violations. I assigned an oral and visual communication task revolving around an artistic presentation of a scene from the book in connection to selected articles from the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC). I noted:

Learning about the articles of the UNCRC was an important layer added to the reading of the novel. I believe it is important and essential for me to associate external information and facts and open a space for students to be able to connect the fictional aspect of the story to real-life historic events and documents. (Teacher Journal, February 26, 2020)

I considered it critical to teach students to assess the way novels position them as readers and evaluate the role of power and society throughout history as they discussed disenfranchised groups portrayed in the narratives. For example, when I first introduced the novel *Ghost Boys*, I was preoccupied with the fact that this novel gave prominence to the tragic events of real-life persons. I reflected:

My concern with reading and teaching through this book is that the story regularly refers to historic events and real-life personalities—and they are mostly known in American culture but not so much here in Canada. The tragic events surrounding Emmett Till’s death, the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, etc. are less known facts among my community of students. I have pondered lengthily about different ways to broach these topics. (Teacher Journal, March 6, 2020)

To resolve this dilemma, I sought to expand my students’ knowledge of the historical/societal context of African American realities. Conducive to the organic approach I had adopted, learners were invited to research key facts about real-life personalities, and why they were important historically. I often shared additional

information such as a video, an article, a line of questioning, or an activity that might situate the different contexts of my students' books and help deepen their understanding. These responsive teaching moments occurred sporadically and spontaneously and encouraged students to keep connecting stories to the real world.

### *Space*

I sought to create a space for my students and I to safely, and boldly, *engage with tough topics*. Through multicultural literature studies, I invited learners into critical conversations, aware this might make them uncomfortable, or stimulate deeper thinking. I committed to be transparent with students, prepared them for critical conversations prior to the novel studies, and provided guidelines to ensure safe spaces. Students yearned to wrestle with matters of social justice, like “Shane” and Andrew, who stated that they had never been asked to read books involving topics that had a connection to real life. As learners voiced their inquisitiveness, they were ready and able to tackle tough topics emerging from the novels and unfolding in their actual world. After we finished reading *The Breadwinner*, “Jessie” wrote in her journal:

*The Breadwinner* is a book with contents that can leave the reader upset and confused. It's full of events that can be hard to comprehend or to fully wrap your head around. When Deborah Ellis was writing the book, I think that she wanted people to see the truth, she wanted for us to understand other people's lives. I don't think we talk about that kind of stuff enough. Not a lot of people know what's really going on out there.

Despite the difficulty of dealing with sensitive topics like poverty, gender inequality, racism, loss, police brutality, or wartime violence, Jessie acknowledged the need to talk about them. My intention when teaching tough topics through multicultural literature was not for students to feel shamed or burdened by history. I observed compassion and hope as students encountered them.

Throughout the multicultural literature units, students acknowledged the significance of safe spaces on their growth as learners. Opportunities for self-expression, like *dialogue journals*, enabled them to explore sensitive issues emerging from the multicultural books. From early in the school year, I invited students to voluntarily jot down thoughts, observations, feelings, and questions as they read, in addition to responding to specific weekly journal prompts. Students' exchanges with their peers were representative of their mutual respect. Most often, students addressed their dialogue journal entries to me as they interacted ongoingly with multicultural literature. From the start, we established that their journals were assessment-free zones, which meant that I would not mark them, or look for errors of spelling or grammar. Like Amber and her classmate, “Phoebe”, I also recognized how significant it was for journaling to remain a non-evaluative activity:

I can see the growth in the content and style of each entry, and I notice a much more ‘relaxed’ learner, one who is not afraid or ashamed of writing what they truly think and how they honestly feel! This is of consequence, in my view, for 13-year-olds in a second language English class. (Teacher Journal, June 15, 2020)

During remote learning, students used their dialogue journal “as a vehicle for reflection and sometimes even as a release of emotions” (Teacher Journal, April 6, 2020).

I noted that “it quickly became clear to me that using a DJ as a tool to reflect, react to, and record personal experiences with the text, was overall a positive initiative” (Teacher Journal, June 15, 2020). Humility became a huge component of this acclimated pedagogical practice, as emphasized in this journal entry:

Reading my students’ journals is a sobering activity and I feel truly humbled and privileged to witness their innermost thoughts. They always have relevant comments, intelligent questions and such insightful wonderings. Yet just like they can’t check their true state of being at the door when in school, they can’t check their true feelings at the ‘virtual door’ when writing in their journals. (Teacher Journal, April 14, 2020)

Many students infiltrated their own worries in their journal entries, after I invited them to, if needed. This materialized as yet another form of storytelling in which my students participated. Amid precarious circumstances, learners shared their personal narratives with me through journaling, and with their peers during virtual gatherings. What stood out to me was how students appreciated the camaraderie and collegiality that had been missing since the school closure. Such spaces proved to be contributory to a meaningful, and personal, learning journey.

### *Place*

One of the most compelling findings within my reflexive posture was the power of relationships, in that it solidified a sense of learning place amid an unpredictable academic year. *Nurturing relationships* and caring for one another became our compass through uncertain, and at times, anxious moments. When I first started writing in my teacher journal, my students had already settled into their homeroom group of classmates, as well as into the flow of our multicultural literature units. I observed early on the dynamics of our classroom community: “They are courteous, thanking their classmates for their questions and engaging in a written conversation that is very mature and always relevant . . . I feel there exists a mutual respect among this group” (Teacher Journal, January 30, 2020). Inviting students to reflect on their views, take on characters’ perspectives, and engage in group conversations about difficult topics began in a learning place where mutual trust and respect had been secured.

After the school closure, a new learning space arose, beyond classroom walls. To preserve our classroom community remotely, I resolved to actively listen to my students’ needs, be prepared to forfeit pre-planned lessons, if necessary, re-establish some form of stability, and most importantly, make myself available for them. What stood out for me was the vulnerability we felt as our routine had suddenly been interrupted by a global pandemic. Yet, reading and talking about our books kept drawing us together, providing a dependable social learning place—an outlet for socializing in the context of learning remotely, both before and during the pandemic.

### *Identity*

I have often felt a responsibility to introduce learners to realities different from their own. Interacting with multicultural books offered occasions to enter conversations about real-life injustices associated with the stories. Readers were positioned to explore their current worldviews, reflect on their values, assumptions, and biases, and examine their

sociocultural identities in the context of a broader, more diverse collectivity. This context speaks to the way students engaged in self-reflection (mirrors), and considered their membership within a larger global community, despite the lack of ethnic and racial diversity in their immediate surroundings. The murder of George Floyd, and the protests that befell, generated a sense of *allyship* in the fight against racism.

After having read the novel *Ghost Boys* in early spring, and following this highly publicized incident, we were attentively and purposefully reading the world as it was manifesting its disgust of current racial injustices. Connecting her thoughts back to the real-life murder of George Floyd, Amber confided in her dialogue journal:

Did I know George Floyd? No. Did I know he existed before this? No, but do I feel destroyed and disgusted cause George could have been one of my friends, yes! Not only that, but the fact that this officer put his knee on his throat and killed him and the other officers were just watching!

What surprised me was the overwhelming response from my students to become part of the solution to the problem of racism. I think back to how it inspired me that “students are extremely perceptive, courageous in their willingness to confront their own way of thinking and determined not to sit on the sidelines” (Teacher Journal, June 4, 2020). As learners demonstrated empathy toward fellow humans, whether fictional characters or real-life persons, they gained deeper insight on social justice problems (windows). They began to see themselves as part of a broader citizenry and considered the steps of becoming allies with those they had come to understand as oppressed. Students now recognized the need to engage in social change (sliding glass doors). Remaining aware and purposeful within my pedagogical practices, I was determined to co-navigate the landscape of agency with my students. The exchanges in which my students and I partook matured and developed into an in-depth inquiry about the kind of actions that could make a difference in our society.

### *Discussion*

As a critical educator, I heeded Freire's (1970/2016) advice to adopt a more reciprocal relationship with learners, thereby trading the traditional dichotomy of teaching and learning for a more equitable rapport. I became the learner as well; through dialogue, both me and my students were “jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (Freire, 1970/2016, p. 80). I felt it was crucial to co-create a classroom environment that would not only encourage but sustain a safeguarded space in which teaching and learning could thrive. Through this study, I realized that the way we engaged with multicultural book studies was just as significant as the books themselves. As I carefully considered how using multicultural literature in the classroom might expand adolescent learners’ worldviews and shape their perceptions as global citizens, it became clear that a self-reflexive posture toward my pedagogical decisions influenced not only my teaching approach, but students’ conditions for learning as well.

This pedagogical lens revealed the notion of time in opportunities to re-evaluate purpose and practices, incorporate current events, and infuse historical context to accentuate learning. This stance of reflexivity opened a space for learners to engage with tough topics and express themselves safely through journaling. Furthermore, it allowed me to prioritize and remain mindful of the needs of my students by nurturing relationships

within our changing learning place. Lastly, a reflexive attitude shed light on unexpected outcomes such as the emergence of allyship as learners took stock of their sociocultural identity. Lewison et al. (2000) remind us of the importance of rendering classrooms places where students can connect their own lives to learning that is real and meaningful to them. This research experience marked a milestone for learners who began to claim ownership of their own educational trajectory, empowered to engage in learning about the world despite all its flaws.

As I reflect back on my journey as a teacher researcher, I realize the importance of embracing praxis in teaching. By adopting a continuously reflexive posture, I was able to consider, select, and adjust pedagogical practices that corresponded with the creation of a more sustainable and democratic classroom. As students developed their critical, cultural, and global consciousness through the book studies, I noticed the way varying my literacy practices bolstered their unfolding conception of global citizenship, in the context of a caring, organic, teaching and learning environment.

#### *Author Note*

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