



## Language Arts Lessons

# Mirrors and Windows with Texts and Readers: Intersectional Social Justice at Work in the Classroom

Laura M. Jiménez

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This column offers teachers a practical model for adopting intersectional pedagogical approaches to foster engagement and understanding in the classroom.

**I stood back** from the door, a little to the side so I wasn't in the way. Even so, the children couldn't miss me in the excitement. They were coming: laughing, squealing, shuffling down the hall. I felt those familiar pangs of first-day nerves and looked back at my class of preservice teachers, at *my* students, and saw they felt it too. The college students were excited to meet the second graders and to begin working on reading, writing, and thinking together. I was excited to invite all of them, college students and second graders alike, to learn and practice intersectional social justice.

This was an immersion class where sophomore teacher candidates worked one on one and in small groups with second-grade students. Our university, located in a large East Coast city, has been partnering with this public elementary school (grades 1–5) for many years. The school is in a predominantly Black and Latinx working-class neighborhood, and the student body reflects this. A majority of the children receive free or reduced lunch. My teacher education class ran for two semesters, meeting once a week for three hours. A little over an hour of that time was spent with second graders. Many of the teacher candidates had previous experience working

in preschools, camps, and afterschool programs. Some came with little or no experience working with children. The teacher candidates reflected the racial profile of elementary teachers in America: They were White, middle-class women, most of whom had never ventured into this part of the city.

While my students were new to the school, this wasn't the second graders' first day. They had been in school for a little over a month. They knew where the bathrooms were, how to get from one part of the confusing building to another, and where the good water fountains were located. The second graders also had a wealth of knowledge that my students weren't yet skilled in recognizing, valuing, or leveraging. My job was to quickly build a learning community where both the teacher candidates and the second graders respected each other and prospered. My pedagogical goal was to use children's literature to center intersectional social justice in the classroom.

In this column, I connect intersectionality and children's literature, discuss the danger of zero-sum thinking in education, and share how foregrounding #OwnVoices children's literature can still maintain a focus on literacy skills and important learning standards.

## Mirrors, Windows, and Intersectional Identities

Intersectional social justice comes down to this: teacher candidates must learn to recognize, appreciate, and celebrate identities that are different from their own across multiple matrices of race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and class, and so on. I forefront the term *intersectional* because, far too often in teacher education, the idea of multiple marginalized identities is rejected in favor of reducing people into binaries; Black or White, straight or gay, male or female. Intersectionality recognizes that we all have multiple facets to our identities, and that marginalized identities are often additive.

The theory of intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) in a piece for the *Stanford Law Review* in which she observed the ways multiple marginalized identities affected Black women in the court system. Her argument was that the U.S. legal system was created by, and is maintained to support, White, straight, middle class, Christian, cisgender, men without disabilities. Individuals that stray from this presumed norm are, by degrees, marginalized. The greater the degree of difference, the more marginalized a person is. I recognize, as do other scholars, the same assumed normative standard at work in education (Tefera, Powers, & Fischman, 2018).

How can teachers center intersectional social justice in the classroom? In the ELA classroom, we have the great advantage of children’s literature. Many teachers are familiar with Rudine Sims Bishop’s (1990) metaphor of books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Dr. Bishop asserts that any book—and, I would argue, any text—can be seen by a reader as a mirror that reflects their ways of being in the world, a window in which the reader can see other ways of being in the world, or a sliding glass door in which the reader can visit a new way of being in the world. Bishop’s framework is concrete enough to grasp easily, but malleable enough to be used across ages, grades, and media. The metaphor assumes a reader who is actively

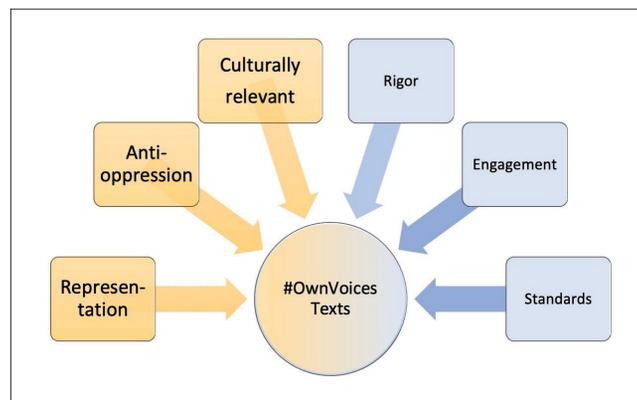
involved with the text to decode, to envision, and finally, to comprehend the meaning. Because readers bring their identities and life experiences into their transactions with texts, a book can be a window for one reader and a mirror for another. In this way, teachers’ expertise and understanding of the students and the literature is essential.

## Fighting the Myth of Zero-Sum in Education with #OwnVoices

In 1928, John von Neumann explained the concept of a zero-sum game. Basically, in any two-sided interaction, one side gains while the other side loses, thus maintaining an equilibrium. This kind of thinking is often evident in education when we think about adding new concepts, lessons, and materials while losing others. For instance, when I suggest to teachers that we must center intersectional social justice as visible, measurable content in ELA classrooms, the first reaction is often, “What do I need to give up?” It’s as if we had an imaginary scale and on one side are all the skills and content teachers must cover. Adding intersectional social justice and children’s literature would throw the whole scale off.

What if, instead, we think of the ELA curriculum as presenting opportunities to highlight high-quality children’s literature that foregrounds intersectional social justice in our teaching and supports learning standards? What would that look like? I keep a sticky note on my desk that looks a bit like Figure 1.

Figure 1. Checklist for book selection



At the center of my schematic is #OwnVoices texts, so that I remember I must, very literally, center marginalized stories and voices. I have to choose an #OwnVoices book that satisfies all the rays you see in the image:

- It must be an authentic representation that shows marginalized individuals as whole people, living complex lives that do not adhere to the dominant White narrative.
- It must push back against biased narratives of the community.
- It must be relevant to the students in the class.
- It must promote deep engagement. In other words, toss the didactic books! Bring in books that show people and communities that raise questions and leave room for discussion and exploration.
- It must be able to address literacy skills and standards.

Although this is asking a lot of a book, I feel it is wholly appropriate to do so. I ask a tremendous amount from a book, especially a picturebook, because I am using the most precious resource there is in education—time—when I bring books into the class. If a book doesn't lend itself to multiple curricular goals, then it isn't the right fit and it isn't worthy of our time. For the purpose of my work with teacher candidates in a second-grade immersion classroom, I focused on using #OwnVoices picturebooks for read-alouds and as writing mentor texts.

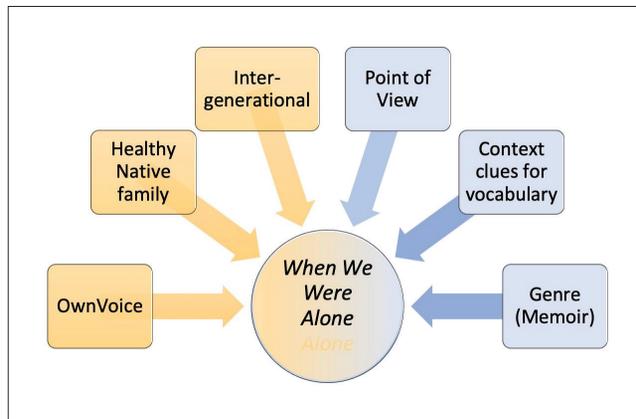
### Intersectionality, Intersectional Social Justice, and Second Grade

My goal was to create and model an ELA learning environment for teacher candidates where intersectional social justice works hand-in-hand with learning standards. My vehicles for doing this were picturebooks: *When We Were Alone* (Robertson, 2017), *A Different Pond* (Phi, 2017), *Alma and How She Got Her Name* (Martinez-Neal, 2018), and *Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019b), for which we also watched the film (Cherry, 2019a).

By using read-alouds as nexus points for the class, I was able to focus on race, culture, language erasure, class, prediction, interpretation, and close reading of visual images while keeping most, if not all, the second graders engaged throughout the lessons. Let me be clear: There is no perfect book that engages all students all the time. But by staying focused and flexible, I was able to build lessons that promoted curiosity and engagement and provided opportunities for students to talk and write about intersectional identities, literary genres, historical perspectives, and contemporary socio-political events and climates in small groups with the preservice teachers.

I was ready to dive in and see what we could do, as a class, to investigate how education in America has purposefully oppressed marginalized communities, and also how those communities have fought back. I chose to read *When We Were Alone* (Robertson, 2017), a book that I find gorgeous and gentle and brutal all at once. It features a young Cree girl asking questions and her grandmother telling her small stories about her experiences in an Indian boarding school as a young girl. The book focuses on the ways these schools were designed to strip away Native identity, language, and culture. While none of the second graders was Cree, a few of them identified as “part Mashpee.” My hope was that by drawing attention to the ways Cree language, bodies, and culture were policed by the boarding schools, the books would resonate with students' own intergenerational experiences of educational oppression. In this way, stories by authors from marginalized communities can reverberate across and among other marginalized people. #OwnVoices texts create mirrors that might not be perfect but provide echoes for the common experience of being colonized, dehumanized, and oppressed, and perhaps build much needed coalitions between marginalized communities.

To prepare for the lesson, I practiced reading the book out loud. It features a Cree poem and a few words that I did not know how to pronounce. I found and reviewed a read-aloud by the book's authors. My lesson plan included a hand-drawn

**Figure 2.** Checklist for *When We Were Alone*

ray (see Figure 2) to make sure that this was a good fit and that I hit on intersectional social justice as well as various learning and literacy goals. Before the second graders joined us, I read the book aloud to the teacher candidates, explained the activity they would be engaging the second graders in, and delivered a short lesson on Native boarding schools.

I love a lively read-aloud, so I made sure to engage the children by asking questions and listening to them before I started reading. I asked about someone's new coat, a haircut, a new sibling. I wanted them to know I paid attention to them when they shared their lives with me. In my way, I was modeling the attention I was going to ask from them in return. We read the book and I didn't need to insert prompts or questions. The children saw and called out the parallels between how the Cree children were treated and their own lives. They recognized the ways Black and Afro-Latino hair is policed when they saw the illustration of the Native kids' hair being shaved. The second graders named the restrictions on their languages and bodies in school. They saw the ways school has promoted and continues to promote Whiteness as a norm.

At the same time that second graders talked about social justice and oppression, we were also working on specific literacy skills. We walked through using context clues for unknown vocabulary—in this case, Cree words for grandmother

and uncle. We covered the beginnings of literary genres, including memoir and historical fiction. We discussed the ways authors move back and forth in time and change point of view, and the visual cues illustrators use to help the reader.

After reading and talking about the book, I asked the second graders to join their teacher candidate buddies. The assignment was for the second graders to think about, discuss, and write about their own identity—an activity from Sara K. Ahmed's (2018) *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension*. I asked the teacher

candidates to share their own identities, including religion, race, sexual and gender identities, and social class. Both second graders and teacher candidates shared all the things that make them unique. They talked about labels and names, about hurt and pride. They asked questions and received answers. In the end, we learned about each other in ways that mattered. We built a place where students could posit questions, follow their curiosity, teach each other, and learn from their peers, as well as the adults in the room, all the while practicing important literacy skills.

## Changed by Degree

We continued learning together throughout the semester. We watched Matthew A. Cherry's Oscar-winning short film *Hair Love* (2019a) and talked about economic privilege, race, the politics of hair, gender roles, and cancer rates in marginalized communities. To prepare, I had the teacher candidates read a chapter from *Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-Inclusive Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom* (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). I asked second graders to write about their homes and families, and I used my own rather poor drawing featuring my kids, my partner, and our dogs as a model for their own descriptive illustration. I used the word *lesbian* to describe myself and my partner, and some of the kids didn't know what that meant. I explained, "Like gay, but we are women." What ensued was another lively activity

and discussion around LGBTQIA members of children's families, their definitions of family, and of course, pets.

I wanted children to start writing their own memoirs, so we read *Alma and How She Got Her Name* (Martinez-Neal, 2018). We returned to the idea of family, including LGBTQIA families, cultural norms around names, and immigration experiences. The teacher candidates were in charge of teaching the second graders as they worked on narrative sequencing, making predictions, and including a main point and details to tell their own stories. By reading #OwnVoices texts each time we met, by talking about all aspects of identity, and by focusing on writing, the second graders saw that they had a right to their own story. With each book and with each lesson, we built an intersectional vocabulary to describe the people in our worlds.

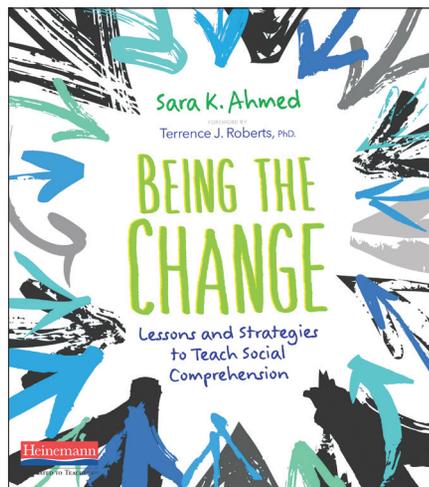
## Conclusion

What if teachers looked at ELA content as additive instead of zero-sum? How would that shift the idea that we don't have time to include intersectional social justice in every lesson? By utilizing the narrative strength of exceptional #OwnVoices literature, we have the opportunity to give marginalized students the chance to see themselves, to see worlds beyond themselves, and to interact in new realities. #OwnVoices texts can serve as intersectional windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). You and your students can read about and learn to name the ways oppression works in the world and in schools. You can begin the hard work of dismantling the hold these systems have on our children and their families by thinking and writing about ways to disrupt those oppressive systems.

Consider how literacy has acted as a gatekeeper to so many marginalized communities, and decide that you will no longer support a racist, homophobic, sexist, ableist, English-only status quo. Instead, work toward building an inclusive, honest, flexible, and responsive classroom where intersectional social justice is part of the fabric, woven throughout the day, to change the reality we live in together.

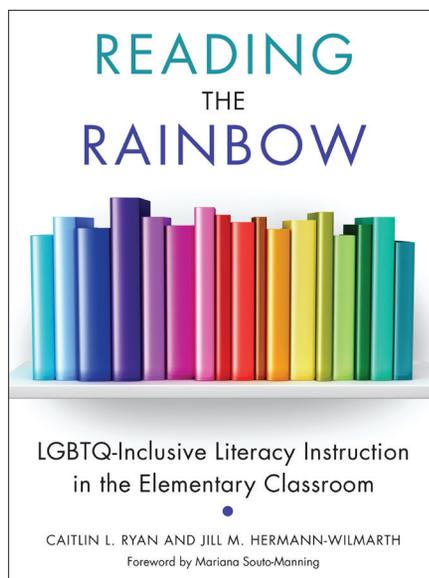
## For Further Reading

Ahmed, S. K. (2018). *Being the change: Lessons and strategies to teach social comprehension*. Heinemann.



Sara K. Ahmed has written a helpful, hands-on guide for introducing identity into the classroom. Throughout the book Ahmed makes a compelling argument that identity must be a central part of the curriculum and not simply an add-on.

Ryan, C. L., & Hermann-Wilmarth, J. M. (2018). *Reading the rainbow: LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction in the elementary classroom*. Teachers College Press.



Caitlin L. Ryan and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth have written a guide for classroom teachers to recognize the ways LGBTQ+ identities can and should be talked about in the classroom. This text provides lessons and examples of discussions with elementary students.

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## INTO THE CLASSROOM

**readwritethink**  
Lisa Storm Fink  **NCTE**

### Investigating Names to Explore Personal History and Cultural Traditions

*There are lots of sayings about names, and most of them are at best only partially true. In this lesson, students investigate the meanings and origins of their names in order to establish their own personal histories and to explore cultural significance of naming traditions.*

<http://bit.ly/2ahWQTK>

### Name Tag Glyphs

*In this lesson, students create a name tag using information about themselves. Each student’s name tag, while being similar, will visually represent personal information. These name tags will help the teacher*

*learn students’ names, but they will also help the students get to know each other and practice visual, contemporary literacy when they interpret glyphs made by others. Students learn that communication is symbolic on a very fundamental level in this lesson.*

<http://bit.ly/29jYlxY>

### Creating Classroom Community by Crafting Themed Poetry Collections

*Students create poetry collections with the theme of “getting to know each other.” They study and then write a variety of forms of poetry to include in their collections.*

<http://bit.ly/1MEjhIT>