



7-5-2016

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## Recommended Citation

Ellis, Aimee. “It’s Just Too Sad!”: Teacher Candidates’ Emotional Resistance to Picture Books. *Reading Horizons*, 55, 2: 1-27, 2016. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, School of Education: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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# *Reading Horizons*

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*Volume 55, Issue 2*

2016

*Article 2*

READING HORIZONS JOURNAL VOLUME 55 ISSUE 2

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## “It’s just too sad!”: Teacher candidates’ emotional resistance to picture books

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# “It’s just too sad!”: Teacher candidates’ emotional resistance to picture books

Aimee Papola-Ellis

## **Abstract**

The use of critical literacy with children’s books that focus on social issues and disrupt the status quo can be a powerful way to create spaces for conversations with students about social justice and empowerment. Teacher candidates in a semester long children’s literature course were asked to respond to a range of children’s texts that dealt with many social issues and disrupted the commonplace. Despite an explicit emphasis on critical literacy and social justice, the candidates were very resistant to using many of the texts in their own future classrooms. They had strong emotional reactions that prevented them from consideration of how the texts could foster opportunities for students to uncover power relations in texts or to discuss ways that texts either maintain or disrupt the status quo. Data from three picture books that were cited the most frequently are shared in this paper, as well as a discussion on the implications for teacher educators who work with teacher candidates in the area of children’s literature.

**KEYWORDS:** children’s literature, critical literacy, preservice teachers



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**Aimee Papola-Ellis, Loyola University Chicago**

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### **Abstract**

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The use of critical literacy with children’s books that focus on social issues and disrupt the status quo can be a powerful way to create spaces for conversations with students about social justice and empowerment. Teacher candidates in a semester long children’s literature course were asked to respond to a range of children’s texts that dealt with many social issues and disrupted the commonplace. Despite an explicit emphasis on critical literacy and social justice, the candidates were very resistant to using many of the texts in their own future classrooms. They had strong emotional reactions that prevented them from consideration of how the texts could foster opportunities for students to uncover power relations in texts or to discuss ways that texts either maintain or disrupt the status quo. Data from three picture books that were cited the most frequently are shared in this paper, as well as a discussion on the implications for teacher educators who work with teacher candidates in the area of children’s literature.

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## **“It’s just too sad!”: Teacher candidates’ emotional resistance to picture books**

As teacher candidates enter the world of children’s literature during their teacher preparation program, they are often excited at the nostalgia for books they loved and enjoyed as children. These texts from their recollection typically have happy endings, warm, lovable characters, and soft childhood memories linked to them. Teacher candidates are frequently unaware of children’s books that focus less on happy endings and more on sociopolitical issues, especially ones dealing with “tough topics” that may affect students in classrooms today.

The purpose of the current study was to explore how teacher candidates responded to picture books that dealt with a range of social issues, how they used a critical literacy lens on these texts, and how they talked about the ways these texts might fit into their future classroom instruction. During a semester long children’s literature course, teacher candidates in my class learned about critical literacy and social justice, and I was eager to task the candidates with finding texts that reflected and empowered their students. I asked them to critically evaluate the way we ask students to read and think and to consider alternative viewpoints on the world. In doing so, it became evident that the teacher candidates had strong emotional reactions to many of the texts, which led to a resistance for considering their use in a future classroom. In this paper, I argue this is potentially problematic if omitting texts that elicit an emotional response leads to certain students feeling underrepresented in the curriculum, or if it leads to a lack of space for important conversations to occur regarding social justice in the classroom.

In the following sections, I will share an overview of critical literacy as was shared with the teacher candidates, as well as background on the connection between emotion and texts. I will then outline the context of the study and participants, as well as the main texts that candidates discussed. The findings of the study are then presented, followed by implications and considerations for teacher educators.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical literacy theory, which stems from the notions and roots of critical theory (Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 2008) is not a teaching method; rather, it is a lens, and a way of thinking that challenges texts, as well as viewpoints on the world (Luke, 2007; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2010); According to Shor (1999), critical literacy is essentially the “language use that questions the social construction of the self” (p. 282). It is concerned with analyzing and critiquing the relationships between language, social practice, and power. Analyzing texts with a critical literacy lens can help unveil ways in which language is used to manipulate readers, as well as to examine power structures within a text. Comber (2001) observed that when teachers and students were engaged with a critical literacy viewpoint, they asked questions regarding the issues of language and power, morality and ethics, and who is privileged by certain ideas, as well as who is disadvantaged. Critical literacy lessons in a classroom are always student-centered and can lead to lively and engaging discussions about controversial or social justice oriented issues (Beck, 2005). These lessons can occur with students of all ages, including college students that are being asked to critically examine texts they plan to use in their future classrooms.

### **Approaching Texts from a Critical Literacy Lens**

Many classroom teachers at all grade levels successfully use critical literacy tenets in their instruction to empower students and allow safe spaces to tackle “tough topics” by using literature as a vehicle (Enriquez, 2014; Fain,

2008; Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012; McCloskey, 2012; Polleck & Epstein, 2015). Moller (2002) wanted to create opportunities for students to engage in conversations about texts that were diverse and promoted social justice. She knew that without teacher support and guidance, book discussions had the opportunity to perpetuate stereotyping and silencing behaviors. She worked with a fourth grade teacher to create spaces in the classroom for students to become empowered by their literature discussions while delving into topics such as racism. Fain (2008) used a critical literacy framework with first and second graders and found they were acutely aware of sociopolitical issues including racism and oppression, and were able to connect to characters in picture books about these topics. By including these texts in her classroom, Fain was able to give her young readers a space for conversations about social justice and ways that they could be empowered to recognize oppression and take a stand against it.

This work with critical literacy is being done with teachers and students in a range of educational contexts. At the preschool level, McCloskey (2012) used critical literacy and writing lessons to create a space to discuss the students' perceptions of people in jail. At the high school level, Polleck and Epstein (2015) found that female adolescents in their study were empowered by the analysis of texts dealing with racism, sexism, and classism, and the use of a critical literacy lens led to a sense of agency and affirmation. In addition to reaching across grade levels, this emphasis on inclusion of tough topics is significant for teachers throughout the world. Ho, Alviar-Martin, and Leviste (2014) looked at social studies teachers in Singapore and their inclusion of controversial topics that related to diversity. Despite policies and discomfort, the majority of the teachers determined that most topics were "controversial-appropriate" and deserved attention within the classroom.

While there are many studies showing students that reported increased

engagement or empowerment from the use of critical literacy and texts that focused on social issues (Fain, 2008; Lewis & Tierney, 2011; McCloskey, 2012; Polleck & Epstein, 2015), there are still many teachers who have resisted the inclusion of these texts in the classroom, often due to their emotional responses.

### **Critical Literacy and Emotion**

Incorporating texts that disrupt the status quo and viewing these texts through a critical literacy lens can spark emotional discussions and strong engagement with the text (Beck, 2005). Researchers and scholars have written about this link between emotions and text, and the role they play in the interaction between the reader and the text (Anwaruddin, 2015; Barthes, 1973; Beck, 2005; Boler, 2004; Chen, 2016; Melinee, 2008; Rosenblatt, 1978). Emotional reactions to texts are normal, and even necessary, for true meaning-making. Rosenblatt (1978) wrote of the many experiences offered to the reader, including the emotional impacts, and wrote about the process of deriving meaning from text relying on both the intellectual and the emotional context of the reader. Anwaruddin (2015) discussed a connection between critical and affective literacy, describing the ways that readers engage with texts through emotion. Additionally, Boler (2004) explored the strong link between emotion and aspects of identity, as well as the relationship between emotion and power, with relation to texts.

There is research supporting the notion that emotions are a strong and logical part to interacting with texts, and that exploring these topics in books, particularly through critical literacy, can often lead to benefits for students (Chen, 2016; Jimenez, 2014; Lewis & Tierney, 2011; Melinee, 2008; White, 2009). For example, using picture books that evoke emotional reactions can support children in understanding their identity, exploring a range of emotions, and developing empathy (Nikolajeva, 2013). Melinee (2008) found that



approaching these types of texts from a critical lens had a positive impact on high school students at risk for dropping out. Lewis and Tierney (2011) examined secondary students' emotional reactions to written texts and films, and discovered benefits to tapping into emotion to explore ideologies and identities.

Despite these benefits, using texts focusing on race, gender, sexuality, class, and other social issues can sometimes lead to discomfort for the teacher, and at times, resistance to including these texts in the classroom. It is not always an easy transition to using texts to facilitate conversations on controversial or sensitive topics in the classroom, and teachers may face emotional challenges when doing so (Ho, Alviar-Martin, & Leviste, 2014). Holloway and Gourthro (2011) found the teacher candidates they worked with expressed discomfort in addressing power issues in texts because of the need to confront and reflect on their own position in society. Leland et al. (1999) found emotional resistance to the use of certain picture books from teachers, with several stating particular books were “too sad,” or that children at their school did not have racial issues, leading them to oppose using books that brought race to the conversation. White (2009) was able to push through this emotional resistance with teacher candidates as they used emotion to fuel their critical reflection on books, but recognized that it was only possible with strong supports in place, such as a strong classroom community.

The research on critical literacy, along with the strong link to emotions, led me to the current study, exploring how teacher candidates responded to texts focused on social issues, how they reacted to using a critical literacy lens, and how they talked about the potential use of these types of texts in their future classroom. In the following sections, I will share an overview of the study as well as findings and implications.

## Overview of the Study

The current study explores teacher candidates' emotional reactions, and at times resistance, to children's books that center on sociopolitical issues. In the following sections, I explain the setting and participants of the study followed by a description of the data sources and method for data analysis.

**Setting and Participants.** During a semester of teaching Children's Literature to two sections of undergraduate students in a teacher education program, I read a wide range of children's books to the class and asked them to read picture books and novels across a variety of genres and themes. There was a strong focus on multicultural and culturally relevant books, which for our course was defined as books with main characters that were members of traditionally underrepresented groups. Additionally, there was a thread of critical literacy woven throughout the course. A total of 20 teacher candidates participated in the study, which explored their understandings of critical literacy and children's literature. All participants were classified as freshmen, and 19 of the 20 were female. Data related specifically to three texts---*Faithful Elephants* (Tsuchiya, 1951), *Martin's Big Words* (Rappaport, 2007), and *And Tango Makes Three* (Parnell & Richardson, 2005)---are included in this paper.

Since the course focused on children's literature for elementary education majors, I read a picture book aloud to the teacher candidates during every class period. At the beginning of the semester, I selected books with a wide range of themes, across genres, and with a variety of cultures represented. Among many others, some course objectives focused on exposing students to critical literacy through goals such as, "understands the role of literature in teaching about social justice and critical literacy" and, "uses literature to promote students' understanding of their lives and society, and as a means to discuss social justice and critical literacy issues." The teacher candidates read an article defining the four main dimensions of critical literacy as disrupting the

commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and promoting social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). They were encouraged to consider texts that disrupted the status quo, focused on sociopolitical issues that were relevant to their future students' lives, and to keep social justice at the center of their instruction. We also held numerous discussions in class about "controversial texts," examining our own biases related to the texts, and thinking broadly about what it means to have diversity in texts.

### **Data Collection**

Data sources for this qualitative study consisted of course assignments and notes on discussions held in class. The first assignment was an "emotional response sheet" completed during class at the time they listened to *And Tango Makes Three* and *Faithful Elephants*. The teacher candidates were asked to record emotions felt while listening to the story, rate the emotion's intensity on a scale of 1 to 5, and explain why they felt that way. The sheet also contained open-ended response questions asking students reasons why they would or would not read the text to a future class and why they felt they had the reactions they did. On the day of the readings, I also took extensive notes on small and large group discussions they had about the picture book. Additional data sources were written reflections in which teacher candidates shared thoughts on a range of books they were either eager or hesitant to use, and a reflection specifically about *Faithful Elephants* at the end of the course to see if their thinking and feelings about the book had changed.

### **Data Analysis and Researcher Stance**

Data was coded using line-by-line analysis (Charmaz, 2011), looking for common ideas throughout the teacher candidates' responses. After this process revealed threads of resistance and emotion, I coded the data again with more

focus on these specific factors.

Since all of the teacher candidates in my class would be spending their teacher preparation program in linguistically and culturally diverse urban schools, and the majority of them stated their desire to begin their career in an urban setting, I believed that becoming familiar with texts that focused on a range of sociopolitical issues often impacting urban classrooms would be beneficial. I selected picture books that I hoped would challenge the teacher candidates to question why certain groups are positioned the way they are in texts, to consider the power and privilege that exists in texts in our world, and to provide a space for conversations about diversity and social justice. My own commitment to social justice and my own prior experiences in culturally and linguistically diverse educational settings shaped my course planning as well as my purpose for the study. However, I went into the study expecting the candidates to be very eager to use these texts in their future work, primarily based on my own positive experiences using them in my former classrooms, as well as their selection of a university that focused on social justice. When the data began to show more resistance than enthusiasm towards the texts, I attempted to clarify my own analysis of their responses through reflective questioning in small and whole group conversations, as well as by looking for patterns across candidates. This reflective questioning was informal and took place within class discussions, with the purpose being to ensure my interpretations of the candidates' emotional reactions were accurate. This transparency regarding the purpose of my questioning allowed the candidates to further engage in critical conversations about their own emotional reactions to the texts that were shared.

### **Findings**

After reviewing, analyzing, and coding the teacher candidates' coursework, as well as anecdotal notes about the class discussions following

various read alouds, several common themes were found. First, the teacher candidates were extremely resistant to using texts eliciting a strong negative emotional response, such as anger or sadness. Next, they had fears about future students, especially in the elementary grades. Finally, their own emotional responses guided their decision making about text selection for their classrooms. While we discussed many books throughout the semester, three stood out as eliciting the strongest responses and most references from the teacher candidates. The data related to those three picture books, *Martin's Big Words*, *And Tango Makes Three*, and *Faithful Elephants*, are shared in the following sections.

### **Setting the Stage**

On the second day of the semester, the teacher candidates all completed a chart indicating their willingness to use texts on a variety of topics in future classrooms. Some of the topics were death, bullying, racism, and gender issues and stereotypes. They indicated their willingness to include the topic through literature on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “I would never use the text” and 5 being “I would use it without hesitation.” At the end of the course, students repeated the exercise.

The participants rated many of the topics low, indicating extreme hesitation to use books that focused on these topics. A few changed their rating by the end of the semester, but most remained unwilling, with scores at 3 or below, which reflected some consideration of including that topic in the classroom but with great concern. The topics that received the lowest scores, indicating the lowest possibility for inclusion in the classroom, were drug use, sex/sexual identity, gangs, and death. Many of the teacher candidates were unwilling to include books about more common topics such as bullying, citing a fear of students feeling “sad” about hearing a book dealing with bullying if they

were being bullied themselves. Several also noted resistance to using books about religious differences, including sharing a text about students from a “non-dominant religion,” for fear of “upsetting or offending someone.” This fear was common throughout many texts we shared over the semester.

Additionally, while the teacher candidates rated these topics on the lower end on this assignment, they actually indicated even more reluctance to use these types of texts when responding privately on other assignments. This happened often throughout the semester; when the participants were sharing reactions with classmates, either small or whole group, they shared slightly more willingness to consider a book on a certain topic than when they reacted knowing nobody else would read their thoughts except me.

Finally, at other times, the teacher candidates expressed a slight willingness to read a hypothetical book about a topic, but changed their perspective when they were exposed to an actual text on that topic. The three texts that posed the most challenge are discussed in the following sections.

#### **“Can We Leave Out the Death?”: Reactions to *Martin’s Big Words***

*Martin’s Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Rappaport, 2007) is a Caldecott honor picture book biography serving as an introduction to the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. The author uses her own words alongside actual quotes from King to share an overview of his life. The story follows King from childhood and early experiences with segregation, to adulthood and his significant impact on the civil rights movement. It briefly shares the circumstances of his death and ends with the inspirational message that King’s words continue to live on. The book can be used across many grades, but it is geared toward primary grade students.

After reading the text aloud, I asked the teacher candidates to engage in

a conversation with a partner as I roamed the room to take notes on conversations. I heard mostly positive remarks during these small group discussions, but when we began to discuss whole group, the tone changed slightly. Alison, a typically soft-spoken freshman, initiated the conversation with concern. She remarked that it had good information, but thought it was not appropriate for any students younger than fifth or sixth grade. When I told her the book was aimed for primary students, she reacted strongly, saying, “I could never use this text with students that young. They shouldn’t be exposed to death at that early of an age.” Before I could respond, several other teacher candidates echoed a similar sentiment. Their concern was the part in the text that deals with King’s death, and reads, “On his second day there, he was shot. He died.” Approximately a third of the teacher candidates felt this was inappropriate for young readers, and a few even suggested reading the text but skipping the part about King’s death altogether. Their reasoning was that they wanted their students to know about King, but not to know that he was shot. They were concerned their students would become fearful or too upset to listen to the rest of the story.

While most of the teacher candidates felt that it was appropriate to use the text in some way, the majority felt it was best to wait until at least fourth grade. Several of them were willing to use it with younger students, as long as they had an option to skip the topic of death. Only a few spoke openly about a willingness to be honest with even their youngest students about this significant part of our history and to use the whole text to start conversations in their classroom about King’s importance.

### **“I Don’t Want To Draw Attention To It”: Thoughts On *And Tango Makes Three***

After showing up frequently on banned books lists for several years, *And Tango Makes Three* (Parnell & Richardson, 2005) has gained in popularity

and discussion in schools and homes. This book relates the true story of two male penguins, Roy and Silo, at the Central Park Zoo that behave like other male-female couples through some of their interactions. The zookeepers notice these penguins sitting on a rock one day, emulating the behaviors of the female penguins who are sitting on their eggs. This leads to a decision by the zookeepers to give Roy and Silo an unhatched egg that needs to be cared for. The two sit on the egg and care for it until it hatches and little Tango is born. Roy and Silo raise Tango as their own penguin chick with much success. The book is often challenged based on implied themes of homosexuality and same-sex marriage and has been removed from shelves of libraries in schools around the United States, but it also continues to be part of many classrooms.

When the teacher candidates reflected at the end of the semester on which text from the course they were reluctant to use, this was the second most frequently cited book. In class, the discussions remained fairly positive, with remarks such as, “It is a cute book!” or “I like that it is true!” Reactions were kept at a surface level, focusing mainly on the idea that it was a story about penguins. I suspected there were more emotions and reactions that the teacher candidates were holding back, and this was confirmed when they were allowed to respond more privately on paper.

More than half of the teacher candidates said they would not use this book at all in their future classrooms. While most said the reason was fear of parents’ reactions, a portion of the responses centered on their own discomfort or uncertainty about the topic of same-sex marriage. They felt that they could not read a book about a topic that they did not believe in and preferred to avoid the topic completely. One candidate, Rebecca, said, “I would be hesitant to use [And Tango Makes Three] because it is a sensitive subject. I don’t think we should talk about those things.” Maggie echoed the same idea, adding, “I would be worried about ruffling the feathers of parents, essentially.”



While three students did name this as a book they were eager to use and thought it would open a space for including their future students who came from non-traditional family structures, most disagreed. Sarah said, "...I would hate to see some kids laughing and making fun of the penguins in the book and having a student in my class who has two dads feeling bad about himself/herself and being embarrassed about his family." Instead of seeing this as an opportunity to disrupt this type of reaction and open a space to discuss diverse families, Sarah preferred to avoid the subject completely in order to prevent the conversation from taking place, mainly out of a need to protect her students from possible embarrassment or sadness.

Some teacher candidates wrote that they might use this text because it was "just animals" or because it was a true story, but they would never consider using a text with realistic characters coming from a same-sex marriage home. In this case, the teacher candidates' own beliefs and biases prevented them from being open to exploring texts, even from a social justice stance. When pushed to consider how this text was a strong exemplar of books that disrupted the status quo, one of the key tenets of critical literacy that we had previously discussed, they remained resistant and would not consider its inclusion in future classrooms.

### **"But It's So Sad!": Digging Deeper With *Faithful Elephants***

Tsuchiya's book *Faithful Elephants* (1951) focuses on events that reportedly occurred at the Ueno Zoo in Japan during World War II. The story tells the tale of three elephants that were starved to death after the Japanese Army commander ordered the deaths of all the zoo's dangerous animals, in order to protect the people in the city in the case of a bomb hitting the zoo. The elephants were unable to be injected with poison, nor would they eat poisoned food that was presented to them. Therefore, the decision was made to

starve the elephants. The text vividly describes the emotions of the zookeepers as the elephants made a plea for food and water, using their remaining strength in hopes of survival. Readers have a moment of hope when the elephant trainer, who loves the elephants dearly, goes against his orders to give the animals a bit of food and water. Ultimately, the elephants are not saved before the war comes to an end, and the animals are memorialized with a monument at the zoo.

Because this text was referenced the most frequently by the participants and with the strongest emotional reactions, more data is included here. The teacher candidates wrote a reaction specifically to this text and had in-depth classroom conversations about it. While this was the one text that only two participants reported willingness to use in a classroom, it is also the one in which the candidates were able to recognize the value of critical literacy instruction inherent in the text.

After reading the text aloud, I gave the class time to think about their reactions. At least three teacher candidates were visibly in tears, and many others sat very still, unsure of how to begin a conversation. Emily, the first respondent, began with, simply, “It’s just too sad.” Others met her comment with nods of agreement, and the class slowly started to join the discussion. Several questioned why a teacher might ever want to use this kind of book in a classroom, which led to our discussion on critical literacy.

When explicitly asked how this book offers many opportunities to consider multiple perspectives and the idea of the author positioning the reader, the class was able to generate many remarks that showed a strong understanding of the tenets of critical literacy. The biggest impact was recognizing that the text is told from a perspective not often represented in texts about war-- other victims. They noted that textbooks and other

materials they recall reading in school focused simply on the facts of the war and shared limited perspectives. One freshman, Hala, said she never thought about animals being impacted by war. She commented, “Wars require people to make sacrifices. It’s just really sad that the animals had to be the sacrifice. I never thought about that.” Another, Meredith, said, “It [war] is never thought about from this angle...it’s very hard. But we should.” The small and whole group discussions following the read aloud began with just two teacher candidates remarking about the story being told from a perspective that is not usually represented in stories about war. The conversation slowly started to unfold with more classmates realizing this was true of their own reading experiences in schools. They began to list all the viewpoints this story could include, the Army commander, the zookeepers/animal trainers, the children who regularly visited the zoo, the people who lived in the city, and soldiers from other countries learning about what happened. Being able to examine an issue from multiple viewpoints, no matter what your own viewpoint may be, is a significant part of developing critical literacy. This text offers a range of perspectives, making it a strong selection to talk about critical literacy skills.

Another aspect of critical literacy that was discussed was recognizing the language used by the author at certain parts to manipulate the reader’s emotions. Some teacher candidates commented that it angered them to be made to feel hopeful when the trainer gave the elephants food; several of them felt this was unfair to position them to be optimistic that the animals might be saved after all, only to have such a horrendously described death be their ultimate fate. When pushed to think about this more critically, Alexandra said she was really bothered:

I never really thought about this before, about how authors can totally make you feel a certain way. I would have thought any feelings I had were just my emotional reaction, but I see how the author can have a lot

to do with that.

Another manipulative part to the text's language teacher candidates discussed involved the elephants doing their trick in a hopeful attempt their trainer would provide them with food. This part of the text was referenced as the most difficult to hear, emotionally, by the teacher candidates. They remarked the visual this created was extremely difficult to bear, and that it reminded them too much of their own pets doing tricks. Kaitlyn, a freshman special education major, said:

I know the author wrote it that way on purpose. It makes me kind of mad when I think about how he (the author) did that on purpose, but I still can't help feeling sad. It made me think of my dog! At least I know now that I was being manipulated. Even if I still feel that way, I feel like I have more control if I at least recognize it.

Kaitlyn captured the overall sentiment of the teacher candidates; as a reader they felt a little power to recognize the manipulation that occurred, even if they were, in fact, manipulated to feel or think a certain way. Most of the freshmen said they had never been taught to use a critical literacy lens or to look for ways they were positioned by authors, and in hindsight, it bothered them to have their first conversation about it be as college students.

However, despite these revelations related to critical literacy, power, and positioning, the teacher candidates were left with ill feelings toward the text. On a post-assessment assignment for the children's literature course, they were asked to recall the one text from the whole semester they were most reluctant to use. More than three-fourths of the teacher candidates named *Faithful Elephants*. The main reason named was the strong emotional reaction they experienced. Sandra said, "I wouldn't want to use [*Faithful Elephants*] in a classroom because it is really sad and I just didn't like it." Courtney shared the

same sentiment:

That book was way too depressing for me to hear, and I feel like I would not be comfortable sharing that with my students. While it does give a great message about wars affecting animals, it would be really difficult for me to get through the book knowing what will happen in the end.

This type of response was very typical. Teacher candidates reported that it was “just too sad” to use, and they needed to protect their students from such sadness. Natasha states directly, “I would never use this book in a classroom. I can’t stand the idea of making children sad.” Throughout the course, we did read other texts related to death and war, such as *Pink and Say* (Polacco, 1994), which involves two well-loved characters dying during the civil war. Even though this text had people who died (and is also said to be based on true events), the teacher candidates had a less powerful emotional reaction than with the elephants. Overall, the main consensus was that this text was an excellent model to teach and use the tenets of critical literacy, with numerous opportunities to question the text, but that it had no place in an elementary (or even middle school, according to most candidates) classroom because it evoked strong sadness.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Although our university has a focus on social justice, and throughout my course I emphasized sociopolitical issues, power relations, and disrupting the status quo through literature, the overwhelming majority of teacher candidates enrolled in the study were reluctant to use text that dealt with “tough topics.” Three texts stood out as evoking the strongest reactions, the first, dealing with the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.; the second dealing with same-sex couples; and the third dealing with the death of animals in war. The

candidates frequently cited their own emotional responses to the text, along with anticipation of their future students' emotional responses, as the reasons why they would hesitate to include the books in their classrooms.

The teacher candidates' own emotional responses to the texts shared in class strongly influenced their decisions about whether they would include those texts in their classrooms. They discussed fear of their students' emotions, with a longing to "protect" their students. Caring about students and their emotional well-being is undeniably a positive attribute for teachers; however, teachers must be cautious that longing to protect does not prevent conversations that could disrupt the status quo and teach valuable lessons about social justice.

We also need to be cognizant of our own emotional reactions and how they might impact others. Our emotions are not only individually formed, but also created through interactions and relationships with others (Chen, 2016; Hargreaves, 2000). Teachers' own emotional reactions to texts could have the power to strongly influence how their students will respond emotionally (Becker, Goetz, Morger, & Ranellucci, 2014), especially when they interact with one another through book discussions and reading response activities. It can sometimes be challenging for teachers to understand the role their emotions play in their classroom, and how to integrate these emotions into their own professional development (Chen, 2016).

At times the resistance to the texts I shared in class stemmed from the emotion of fear, fear of how to handle what the candidates deemed as controversial topics in the classroom, or fear of pushback from students' parents. This can be particularly daunting for teacher candidates or new teachers just entering the field and is certainly understandable. However, this fear has potential to result in narrowing the curriculum and censoring content in their instruction (Ho, Alviar-Martin, & Leviste, 2014), which could lead to

missed opportunities for critical reflective conversations or even altered views of key historical events. For example, the suggestion from one of my teacher candidates to read *Martin's Big Words* by omitting the part about King's death was particularly troublesome. There are many issues in history that are cause for very serious conversations in the classroom, ones that would evoke sadness, anger, and confusion. However, these events are essential to understanding key pieces of our history. It would seem unlikely that a classroom teacher would use discomfort as a reason to exclude lessons on slavery, the Holocaust, or civil rights. These are important aspects of history, yet are filled with potential spaces for emotional dialogue to occur. By embracing the emotion and reflecting on how it links to our own individual and collective identities, it can empower our students to become critical reflectors of the world in which we live.

While it is understandable that some of these texts were emotionally difficult and dealt with subject matter that needs to be considered for the individual students and their developmental level, the blanket decision not to use them because they are “upsetting” does not allow time and space for students to critically reflect on these issues. Pushing past the fear and other emotions in order to include texts on social issues or to view texts with a critical literacy lens can lead to benefits for students in the classroom, such as recognizing power relations and privilege, understanding multiple perspectives, and learning how to link reading and writing to social action (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Additionally, if classroom teachers do not embed tenets of critical literacy in instruction and teach students how to read texts with this lens, those students may be less equipped to recognize issues of injustice and power in the texts they encounter leaving them open to be unknowingly manipulated by authors. When considering texts that deal with diversity in culture or even family structure, like *And Tango Makes Three*, teachers should

not simply omit those that may not align with their own backgrounds and beliefs, or those they fear will lead to challenging dialogue. This potentially robs students of the opportunity to see themselves in the texts we share on a regular basis. By embracing this discomfort and using it to fuel discussions about social justice, identity, and power (Boler, 2004) we help students learn to navigate through tough conversations in many contexts.

Emotional connections and reactions to text are necessary and important for readers (Rosenblatt, 1978). These emotions have the power to lead to social control or to political resistance, and within educational contexts can serve to maintain the status quo or to disrupt it (Boler, 2004). Schools and classrooms have the potential to function as a site of critical reflection, empowerment, and transformation for individuals and groups (Boler, 2004; Holloway & Gourthro, 2011; Jimenez, 2014). However, becoming critically reflective is often more challenging than teacher candidates expect because of the emotional self-exploration involved (Holloway & Gourthro, 2011). Boler (2004) invites educators to think of this as a “*pedagogy of discomfort*,” where this fear and emotion are actually crucial in reflecting critically and challenging one’s beliefs and assumptions about the dominant ideologies.

Developing this pedagogy of discomfort certainly occurs over time. The teacher candidates in this study were all classified as freshmen, enrolled in only their second semester in the teacher preparation program. They had already spent time in school sites as an observer, but they had limited experiences at this point in their program interacting with children in schools or observing teachers using texts that focused on some of the topics we explored as a class. However, having this class take place early in their teacher preparation program also allowed the candidates to view the use of text in classrooms with a critical literacy lens, to consider students’ engagement when teachers read texts focused on social issues, and to discuss with classroom



teachers how they can balance their own emotion with text selection in the classroom. It is my hope the teacher candidates will continually reflect on their own emotional links to curriculum and pedagogy in the classrooms they visit throughout their program and eventually in their own classroom.

Teacher educators should consider the role that children's literature plays in their own courses, and the types of text they introduce to teacher candidates. Oulton, Day, Dillon, and Grace (2004) surveyed teachers on the ways they viewed controversial topics in the classroom, finding few teachers that felt well prepared for handling these topics in school. There is a need to create spaces within the university walls to allow teacher candidates to explore their own identities in connection to race, gender, culture, and other social issues and how those factors shape our emotions and experiences. These conversations can help prepare reflective educators who may then promote these same conversations in their classrooms (Holloway & Gourthro, 2011). Challenging teacher candidates to examine power relations that exist in texts and in schools and to confront those power relations despite emotional responses is imperative to preparing teacher candidates to move toward a social justice-oriented curriculum that represents the backgrounds of all students (Jones & Enriquez, 2009). By embracing the emotions and unease, teachers explore their own beliefs and identity, and help their students do the same, which has potential to lead to empowerment for all children.

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