# Engaging Preservice Teacher Candidates with Multicultural Children's Literature

**Mary L. Fahrenbruck and Leanna Lucero**

> "From my view, best practice means that [multicultural] books are integrated, and students have access to multicultural literature for silent reading, homework assignments, and across subjects…Having a wide range of books offers students opportunities to inquire about the world and its people, world events, and areas of interest to them" (Cueto & Hillman, 2017).

Cueto and Hillman's words ring true for inservice teachers who know the power of culturally and linguistically relevant multicultural children's literature (MCL) to transform the lives of readers. Margaret Meek states that when inservice teachers strategically embed literature throughout the curriculum they,

> "…help children learn that words mean more than they say, how they help children to tolerate uncertainty, how they recruit children into confronting the "world as it might be" and how they help children to encounter the "intertext of… (their own) unconscious" and so grow in self-awareness and reading reflexivity" (Meek in Smith, 2011, p. 1).

Because of our own experiences as avid readers and teachers, we know the transformative power of multicultural children's literature. As teacher educators at a public university, we want to pass along to preservice teacher candidates our passion for children's literature as a source of enjoyment and a transformative teaching resource. As such, we consider ourselves successful when it comes to creating opportunities for candidates to read for enjoyment. However, we discovered we have been less successful when it comes to helping candidates understand that MCL can transform the lives of the students they will soon teach.

In this article, we share the strategic plan we developed to immerse candidates in MCL during our Reading, Math and Language Arts methods courses. We describe response strategies that helped candidates transact more deeply with the literature. Then we share ways we invited candidates to use MCL in the lessons they taught to children in practicum classrooms. We conclude with our new understandings about connecting candidates with MCL.

## Situating Our Work

The preservice teacher candidates with whom we work, typically juniors and seniors, enroll in methods courses taught off campus at a local public school. Concurrently, they complete a 160-hour practicum experience where they work with teachers and children in elementary classrooms. The practicum classroom provides a supportive, authentic space for candidates to put into practice what they are learning in their methods courses.

The candidates enrolled in our methods courses mirror the demographics of preservice teacher candidates from many other university teacher education programs (TEP) in that they are mostly females between 21-27 years old. Because of the university's location in the Borderland region of the US and its designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution, most candidates (approximately 75%) self-identify as Lantinx (Ramirez & Blay, 2016). Candidates also identify as white, Native American and African-American. Prior to entering the TEP, candidates complete a children's literature course (taught in the English Department) and a multicultural education course. The courses focus on multiculturalism and social justice issues; tenets that frame the mission and vision of the university. Because of these courses, we believed candidates would be familiar with MCL titles, authors and illustrators and would easily integrate MCL into the lessons they create during their methods courses.

## Uncovering Candidates' Disconnect with MCL

Despite candidates' preparation prior to enrolling in the TEP, we found that they were unfamiliar with authors, illustrators and even titles of popular multicultural children's literature. When we first made this discovery, we attempted to fill the void by asking candidates to read 20 multicultural children's books that resonated with them. Through the assignment, we encouraged candidates to read stories for their own enjoyment. Short (2012) warned us that teachers often value literature not for the stories themselves, but for their usefulness to "teach something else- reading skills, critical thing, writing models, historical events, mathematical concepts" (p. 9). We wanted to expand candidates' disposition toward the purposes of MCL to include reading for pleasure and reading to transform the ways people think about being and acting in the world today. We wanted candidates to experience the power of stories to "create our views of the world and [as] the lens through which we construct meaning about ourselves and others" (Short, 2012, p. 9).

As the first semester ended, we reflected on the success of the assignment. We were disappointed when we noted the literature candidates had selected for the assignment were what Mary refers to as *chicken nuggets*; stories without much cultural substance that children will enjoy, but not grow from having read. These included Disney-themed books and *I Can Read* books. We lamented that if candidates were unable to select quality MCL for themselves, how would they be able to select MCL to transform the lives of their future students. We knew we needed to create a new plan. We decided to be more strategic about the ways we immersed candidates in MCL, facilitating their transactions with the stories and encouraging them to teach with the literature. We analyzed artifacts from candidates (e.g. course assignments, teaching reflections, course evaluations), looking for evidence that they were developing a passion for children's literature and an understanding of the transformative power of MCL as a teaching resource.

## Immersing Candidates in Multicultural Children's Literature

The first step in our plan required us to introduce candidates to culturally and linguistically rich multicultural children's literature during our courses. We

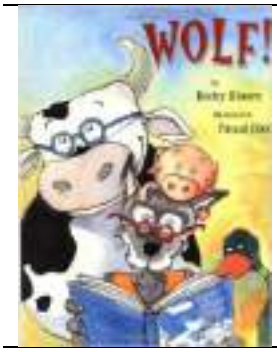
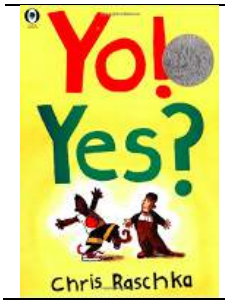
employed three strategies: 1) modeling read alouds, 2) using professional resources, in this case rubrics, to determine quality MCL, and 3) selecting MCL as a required reading for the courses we teach. We collected artifacts from candidates to document their responses.

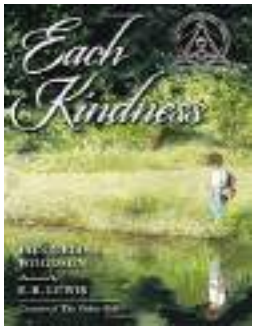
## Modeling Read Alouds

Our purposes for read alouds was to introduce candidates to quality MCL, to model reading aloud to a group, and to engage them in critical conversations about literature. Because Mary teaches the literacy methods course, she began reading aloud on the first day. Mary's read aloud text selections at the beginning of the semester are strategic and relate to the essential understanding of the course for that day. Below, we highlight examples of the literature, the essential understanding and our reflections about the literature in Mary's methods course.

Table 1

*Read Aloud Stories used to Introduce Candidates to Children's Literature*

| Literature | Essential Understandings and Reflection |
|---|---|
|  | Candidates discuss the transformation of Wolf from a wild savage animal to a sophisticated intellect as a result of his learning to read. We connect this message to stereotypes associated with readers and reading. Candidates are introduced to "the literacy club" (Smith, 1994, p. 229) and challenged to think about their place in the club. We explore the tensions and connections candidates have with the text. For example, Wolf purchases his very own book with money he has saved. Candidates often connect with Wolf as they tell about the joy they felt when they purchased their very own books as children. |
| | In this story, Tillie must attend school every day of the year because the principal at her school wants all the children to learn as much as they can. Candidates discuss the notion of life-long learning in and outside of school. They come to understand the importance of accessing students' funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Candidates begin to read verbal and visual narratives with a critical lens, uncovering bias's they've not thought about. For example, candidates empathized with Tillie because she must attend school on Christmas, but most never considered that their Jewish classmates must attend school on Hanukkah and their Muslim classmates must attend on Ramadan. With this text, candidates begin to make more critical text--to--text and text--to--world connections. |
|  | This story of friendship, told in 28 words, helps candidates understand the reciprocal relationship between verbal and visual narratives. They begin to value illustrations as much as they value the text. The sparse text also reinforces our suggestion to pre-read and then practice reading aloud the text before reading to an audience. |




Bullying is frequent topic of conversation among candidates. As such, they connect with the story of Chloe and Maya until they realize the story does not have the "happily ever after" ending they expect. The conversations surrounding *Each Kindness* reveal that many candidates have limited experiences transacting with unpredictable plots in MCL. As such, candidates must grapple with the fact that many stories reflect the unpleasant realities children and adults encounter throughout their lives. Candidates experience a shift in their thinking about children's literature after the read aloud of *Each Kindness*.

## Resources to Analyze MCL

In our conversations with candidates, we acknowledge that it's difficult to determine quality MCL. We discuss accuracy and authenticity with candidates. Then we share with them the rubrics we use ourselves to determine the quality of a text.

- *10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism* by Kathy Short (http://wowlit.org/links/evaluating-global-literature/10-quick-ways-to-analyze-childrens-books-for-racism-and-sexism/)
- *Criteria for Selecting Nonfiction Picture Books* by Sharon Ruth Gill (http://www.ldonline.org/article/40062/)
- *Children's Science Trade Books Evaluation Form by Pamela A. Halsey and Susan G. Elliott found in their article, Assessing Textbook Publishers' Recommendations for Using Children's Literature in Science (see references for full citation).*

Candidates used the resources to identify quality MCL, which they were required to incorporate into lessons they crafted later in the semester. In some instances, candidates shared these resources with the practicum teachers with whom they worked. Using and sharing these resources signaled to us that candidates were beginning to value MCL.

## Building Candidate's Professional Libraries

Another strategy we used to immerse candidates in MCL was to require them to purchase MCL. We reasoned that owning MCL would help candidates build their classroom libraries. One way we helped candidates acquire MCL was to ask them to purchase specific books as part of the required texts for the courses we teach. We used these books in our teaching and encouraged them to use the texts and strategies with children in the practicum classroom. Along the way, we noticed that some candidates didn't purchase the books, telling us they couldn't afford the books and so borrowed them from the university or public library. As former teachers, we remembered the invaluable resources we've accessed through our public libraries and consequently supported and encouraged all candidates to access books through this resource. Another way we helped candidates acquire MCL was to invite them to purchase books through Scholastic book orders. Candidates fondly remembered the

book orders from their childhoods and many ordered books each month. By this time in the semester, candidates eagerly anticipated our read alouds, thoughtfully collected resources and were building their own classroom libraries. Table 2 provides guiding steps we used to help candidates learn to utilize tableaux (plural of Tableau) as a literature response strategy (Fahrenbruck, 2014).

Table 2

*Steps for Teaching the Tableau Strategy* (Adapted from Misiewicz, 2009)

| | |
|---|---|
| First | Explain that a Tableau is a frozen or still scene that shows, rather than tells, their understanding of a story or a portion of the story (e.g. scene, climax). |
| Next | Practice creating a Tableau. Emphasize facial expressions, body position and placement, and the use of props to convey meaning. Readers can work individually, with a partner or in groups. Include objects (e.g. a flower, spaghetti), emotions (e.g. joy, bewilderment), and abstract concepts (e.g. democracy). |
| Then | Groups select a portion of a story to depict as a Tableau. Provide time to rehearse their Tableaux. |
| Finally | Present Tableaux to an audience. Audience members verbally share their understandings about the Tableaux. After the audience has shared their understandings of the Tableau, readers share with the audience the various components of the Tableau and the reasoning behind the components. |

## Facilitating Candidates Transactions with Multicultural Children's Literature

When we asked candidates to think of ways they might convey their understanding of the stories we read, they typically responded with activities such as keeping a reading log, writing a letter to one of the characters in the story or writing a traditional book report. Their responses paved the way for us to expand their repertoire of response strategies from paper/pencil to art and drama. The second step in our plan required us to facilitate candidates' transactions with the text. Three activities we used during our courses to accomplish this include: 1) story ray, 2) dramatic tableau, and 3) literature discussions.

### Story Ray

Candidates understand that response strategies provide a way for teachers to assess readers' comprehension of a text. Moving beyond typical response strategies (i.e. worksheet, book report) is often a new, highly engaging experience for them. We've found the story ray (Short & Harste, 1996) strategy popular among candidates. For this strategy, readers collaboratively create a chapter by chapter unfolding of a novel on narrow strips of white paper (approximately 2" wide X 36" long). We use adding machine paper (for those of you who remember adding machines). In the photo below, each candidate created one visual ray, representing a chapter from *I am a Taxi* by Deborah Ellis (2011). The rays are connected and displayed in the shape of the sun.

Figure 1

Each story ray provides a strong sense of the chapter, with a focus on ideas, themes, characters, setting, mood and tone. To begin their story rays, candidates skimmed their selected chapters several times, paying attention to images, symbols, colors, and words or phrases that seem especially significant. Then they considered some guiding questions to help them plan their story rays:

- How can I offer a visual essence of this chapter?
- What color(s) do I use for the background and for the images I choose to represent?
- Why are these colors significant to the chapter?
- What images, symbols, artifacts, items, should I represent on this strip of paper?
- What is the significance of each? Should I repeat any images? What layout should I use to capture a strong sense of my chapter?
- Should I include words? A quote? A short phrase? If so, where do the words belong on my story ray? Should I repeat them? If so, why?
- Leave little or no white space on your ray, unless white is essential to what you are creating. Consider using a variety of media to create bold colors--collage', torn paper, paint, pastels, mixed media, etc. (Short & Harste, 1996)

Figure 2

The photo above illustrates readers' interpretations of the novel while considering the guiding questions. The green and brown colors represent the setting of the jungle. The red letters in the word "Explode" seem to shatter into pieces, representing a major event in the plot (which we won't reveal).

Candidates presented their story rays in class where we used them to facilitate a discussion about the novel. During the discussion, they shared their new thinking about the chapter and/or the book that resulted from planning for and creating their story ray. Then we displayed the story ray in the hallway at the school where we worked. In doing so we offered children and teachers a visual sense of the plot, characters, and issues in the novel, hopefully inviting them to read the book themselves.

## Dramatic Tableau

In this strategy, candidates used their bodies and facial expressions to create a still or frozen scene that conveys their new understandings about the ideas, theme, characters, plot, and setting of a story (Farmer, 2013). Table 2 provides guiding steps we used to help candidates learn to utilize tableaux (plural of Tableau) as a literature response strategy.

We also invited candidates to watch videos of inservice teachers implementing the dramatic tableau strategy with children in classrooms (see for example, *Dramatic Tableaux* from Annenberg Learner; https://www.learner.org/resources/series169.html). Watching children use the strategy in the classroom provided a context for candidates to see how the guiding steps can be taught and how this strategy helps readers make deeper connections to a novel.

Candidates worked in small groups to create dramatic tableaux of award-winning novels and then performed their tableaux for the children at the school where we worked. Afterwards, several candidates implemented tableaux in their practicum classrooms with children. Candidates like Marie found the strategy beneficial, stating,

> "At first I did not understand how this could be used as an effective response strategy in the classroom. After participating in the activity and viewing the video, this is an assignment I hope to be able to use in my student teaching and in my future classroom. This was a beneficial assignment because it taught me a more creative way to have students respond to a reading instead of them answering comprehension questions." (Marie, personal communication, 2014).

### Literature Discussions

Leanna used *Dante and Aristotle Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz (2014) as a required piece of relevant multicultural young adult literature for the Language Arts methods course. This book has won numerous awards including the Pura Belpré Narrative Medal for Latino fiction and the Stonewall Book Award for LGBTQ fiction. Leanna used this coming-of-age novel to engage candidates in conversations about racial identity, gender identity, and sexuality. These conversations revealed that most candidates have very limited experiences reading LGBTQ children's/young adult literature and even more limited experiences discussing issues surrounding identity. James commented,

> "I never would have thought about including LGBTQ literature until reading this book and discussing it. It made me think of my own views and biases and how I will approach such issues in my future classroom."

After reading *Dante and Aristotle Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, candidates expressed a new understanding about the value of including LGBTQ children's literature in elementary classrooms. Selena connected the story to the issue of bullying and thought "[it] could be prevented if topics such as sexuality, race, and disabilities were brought up and integrated into a lesson through the use of LGBT children's literature." Candidates voiced a high level of commitment to incorporating this genre in their future classrooms, as well as understood the need to have critical conversations about this literature.

## Supporting the Use of Multicultural Children's Literature in Teaching

By this time in the semester, candidates were eager to share MCL with children in their practicum classrooms. As such, we designed course assignments that required candidates to use MCL in their lessons for children. These assignments represented the third step in our plan: to support candidates as they used MCL in transformative ways to enhance their teaching and enrich children's learning.

### Read Aloud Lesson

Mindful of the fact that many candidates have never read aloud to a large group of children, our first assignment invited them to conduct a whole class read aloud with MCL. By this time, candidates had seen us model read aloud moves (i.e. reading with expression, showing the illustrations) and were ready to read aloud to children for pleasure and enjoyment. We asked candidates to provide a rationale for their selection of the read aloud book because we wanted them to experience using the rubrics to determine quality MCL. With a few exceptions, most candidates found MCL on their own.

Candidates expressed surprise and delight when they reflected on this read aloud experience. Candidates noted that children enjoyed the MCL and wanted to share their connections with their classmates. Candidates were surprised when children referenced the MCL in their writing and when they continued to make connections days after the read aloud ended. This lesson helped us convince candidates of the importance of reading aloud culturally and linguistically relevant MCL.

## Integrated Reading/Math Lesson

For this assignment, we created an integrated project that combined elements from Mary's literacy course with elements from Leanna's math course. For this project, we invited candidates to select MCL to read aloud to children and then teach a math concept embedded in the text. Our purposes for this project were for candidates to explore ways math can help children better understand a story and for candidates to directly experience children's connections to MCL.

Candidates understood that selecting quality MCL would set the stage for a successful lesson. They visited libraries and book stores to find MCL. Titles included *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* (Tonatiuh, 2013), *Henry's Freedom Box* (Levin, 2007), and *The Water Princess* (Verde & Badiel, 2016).

With support, candidates identified a portion of the plot that math could be used to help children better comprehend the story. For example, in *Henry's Freedom Box*, children used math to calculate the area of the box Henry used to mail himself north to freedom. Knowing the dimensions helped children understand how minuscule the box was for an adult. The children empathized with Henry as he endured excruciating pain from traveling in the box. Empathizing with Henry also helped children understand how desperately Henry wanted to escape the bonds of slavery. Using math to better comprehend the story brought children closer to Henry and his quest for freedom, something neither the text nor illustrations could fully accomplish.

In both the Read Aloud Lesson and the Integrated Reading/Math Lesson, candidates wrote lesson reflections where they noted that children eagerly participated in the lessons. After teaching the Integrated Lesson using *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* (Tonatiuh, 2013), Amaya wrote, "By choosing engaging literature on topics that children have never heard of or talked about before, we truly grabbed their attention and intrigued the students from the get go." In Elise's Read Aloud Lesson reflection

she wrote that she "was definitely surprised that the students… told [me] how much they loved this activity and how they wanted to have the opportunity to do this again." Candidates like Josiah also noted that children "asked deeper questions" about MCL than when they read stories from their curriculum textbooks. Josiah wrote that "these questions assured me that [children] were working and thinking beyond the story." Candidates like Christy concluded that incorporating MCL in lessons "is a lot of work, but it is well worth it" because it was an effective way to engage children in reading and responding to MCL.

Using MCL also presented tensions for some candidates like Tara who wondered "What will parents think about the topics" in MCL. She defended her decision to use MCL though, writing "It's not like [the topics] aren't talked about at home." Kevin went so far as to say MCL "that show[s] division amongst different cultures should be avoided" because "it can have a negative effect on certain students…rather than showing issues it might be a better strategy to…teach unity and equality to students." Tara and Kevin's comments helped us understand the struggles candidates still had despite our efforts to engage them with MCL.

## Impact of Candidates' Transactions with Multicultural Children's Literature

At the end of the semester, we concluded that our plan to engage preservice teacher candidates with MCL had a significant impact on the way they transacted with and began to value MCL. Javier came to strongly believe that MLC "supports diversity, allows learners to be critical learners and attempts to value all lives, especially highlighting issues revolving around power and oppression."

Encouraging candidates to teach lessons that included MCL provided them with multiple opportunities to experience the high level of student engagement that accompanies teaching with MCL. Jed noted "As we read, [the children] were all focused on the book and were eager to see the illustrations. It seemed they were most intrigued because of the quality of the text we chose." Tara said she "really enjoyed getting to see children get excited about the topic…they were more receptive that I even expected!"

Engaging candidates with MCL also provided ideas for lesson plans for their future classrooms. Gracie said she would like to integrate MCL "into a writing/reading workshop" because MCL will provide fodder for children "to write about that they can relate to on a more personal level." Hugo thought MCL would "go well with social studies" especially "when the literature ties in with the content matter…and standards."

At the beginning of this article, we confessed our limited success helping preservice teacher candidates understand the transformative power of MCL. The evidence from this study indicated that we enhanced candidates' understanding through meaningful engagements with MCL. They developed a deeper appreciation of MCL and came to understand that MCL can transform the lives of their future students.

Mallory validated our efforts best when she wrote "I feel as though this semester prepared me to feel comfortable and confident with using MCL."

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**Mary L. Fahrenbruck** is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

**Leanna Lucero** is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Her scholarship focuses on teacher education and social justice issues with an emphasis on queer studies in education.