

Article

Teacher Candidates' Use of Inclusive Children's Literature in Interactive ReadAlouds: Successes, Challenges and Implications

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Abstract: Book banning and laws against discussing so-called “divisive concepts” in the United States are limiting what is read to children in schools, even in places without specific legislation. Books by Black and LGBTQIA+ authors and/or about Black or LGBTQIA+ characters are specific targets of the book banning and censorship efforts. The research reported in this article used a case study approach to explore two teacher candidates' responses to inclusive children's picture books and their discussions of the books with students in their classrooms during their practicum. The results indicated that the teacher candidates strongly believed in the value of sharing inclusive children's literature and effectively utilized open-ended questions to spark critical thinking. However, they found it challenging to follow their students' leads and build on comments in ways that could have resulted in deeper thinking and understanding. More practice, feedback and reflective opportunities are needed during teacher preparation in actual classrooms to improve teacher candidates' abilities to conduct interactive read-alouds about topics that feel risky. The findings also highlight the need for schools and mentor teachers to model discussions about inclusive children's books.

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1. Introduction

Book banning and laws against discussing so-called “divisive concepts” in the United States are limiting what is read to children in schools, even in places without specific legislation. Books by Black and LGBTQIA+ authors and/or about Black or LGBTQIA+ characters are specific targets of the book banning and censorship efforts (American Library Association, 2024a; Beland & Dearing, 2023; Natanson, 2022; Pendharkar, 2022a, 2022b). Some states have laws restricting discussions of “divisive concepts,” such as race, gender, and sexuality. In this context, educators may understandably limit their use of inclusive children's literature due to concerns about backlash from parents, community members or administrators, and being fired (Hauser, 2023; Natanson, 2022). The research reported in this article used a case study approach to explore teacher candidates' responses to inclusive children's picture books and their discussions of the books with students in their grade one (ages six and seven) and grade five (ages 10 and 11) classrooms. I define inclusive children's literature as texts accurately portraying the diversity of contemporary and historical human experience. The questions guiding the research

were as follows: (a) how do the teacher candidates perceive inclusive children's literature in the current political, social and educational context? (b) what successes/challenges do they experience as they navigate conversations with their students about inclusive children's books? The findings have implications for future research, schools and teacher education.

As of 2024, 20 states in the U.S. “enacted restrictions on how teachers can discuss so-called ‘divisive concepts’—including race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation—in classrooms, affecting roughly 1.3 million teachers and 20 million students” (Diliberti et al., 2024). Such “gag orders” (Sachs & Young, 2024) are not limited to K-12 public schools. Florida also enacted legislation prohibiting teacher preparation programs in public and private universities from instruction “based on theories that systematic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States, and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequalities” (Sachs & Young, 2024). Those in favor of enacting restrictions believe that teaching about racism, oppression and privilege may increase divisions and make white students feel guilty (Iati, 2021). In the words of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, “Teaching kids to hate their country and to hate each other is not worth one red cent of taxpayer money” (Iati, 2021).

Divisive concepts’ laws also target and prohibit instruction related to sexual orientation and gender identity on the grounds that such books and conversations may influence these aspects of students’ development and lives (Zalaznik, 2023). This issue is not limited to the United States. In April 2024, PEN International (2024) decried “the alarming surge in book bans worldwide, including Belarus, Brazil, China, Hungary, the Russian Federation, Türkiye and the USA, where authorities are attempting to stifle dissent and criticism by censoring literature, persecuting writers, and suppressing inconvenient truths. In this climate, it is not surprising that primary grade teachers (children aged five through eleven) are reluctant to read and discuss children’s literature in any way linked to race, sexuality or gender in their classrooms. The New Jersey State Bar Foundation reported:

Laws in some states allow citizens to report educators for teaching something that they believe violates a divisive concepts law. Penalties for teachers that violate these laws often include the loss of their job and suspension of their teaching license. In addition, the schools where they teach could be in jeopardy of losing state funding. (Raybin Emert, 2024).

1.1. The “Spillover Effect”

The RAND Corporation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that conducts research to inform policy and decision-making, surveyed over 30,000 educators, including teachers and school/district leaders, in a nationally representative sample to find out how they were reacting to the divisive concepts’ legislation. They found that the laws have a “spillover effect”:

Even in places with no official restrictions, half of teachers say they have made the decisions themselves to limit discussions of political and social issues in their classrooms. And even in very liberal communities—where we might expect support for this type of instruction to be the largest—some 40 percent of teachers say they have decided to limit discussions of these topics. (Diliberti et al., 2024)

In Massachusetts, the state in which I teach literacy and children’s literature courses in a teacher preparation program, there are no laws against teaching “divisive concepts”. However, the number of banned and challenged books in Massachusetts has quadrupled since 2021 (Beland & Dearing, 2023), part of a national book banning trend (American Library Association, 2024b). Recently, a student teacher in my university’s teacher

preparation program had to request approval for the books used in her lessons via her school's book approval process. The school refused to share the approval criteria.

The trend away from books and discussions that are responsive to students' lives and identities is in direct opposition to principles for literacy education set forth by international, national and state professional organizations and state policy. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) is committed to culturally sustaining and responsive teaching practices that promote cultural competence and sociopolitical awareness. MA DESE defines cultural competence as "affirming students' background and identities" and "fostering their abilities to understand and honor others' cultures". Sociopolitical awareness is defined as identifying, analyzing and working "to solve systemic inequities in their communities and the world" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023). Major international and national literacy organizations share these values and priorities. For example, the International Literacy Association's (ILA) Children's Rights to Read initiative outlines the basic rights every child deserves and includes "the right to read texts that mirror [children's] experiences and languages, provide windows into the lives of others, and open doors into our diverse world" (International Literacy Association, n.d.). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has an Intellectual Freedom Center to help educators and students resist censorship. The NCTE position statement entitled "The Students' Right to Read" includes "resources that can be used to help discuss and ensure students' free access to all texts" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2018). These state, national and international commitments to inclusive texts are supported by evidence demonstrating the many benefits of reading and discussing inclusive children's literature, such as engaging children in thinking critically; developing empathy; supporting curricular goals; building knowledge; promoting respect for diversity; and supporting the experiences of those who have traditionally been marginalized in the curriculum (e.g., Bishop, 2007; Husband, 2019; Jiménez, 2021; Lysaker & Sedberry, 2015; Lysaker & Tonge, 2013; Miller, 2022; Plett Reimer, 2019; Pomerantz, 2025; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Scales, 2020; Tatum, 2008). Teacher educators need to help teacher candidates navigate this complex educational landscape where inclusive children's books are both vilified and restricted in some communities and schools but championed by the state department of education, professional organizations and their teacher preparation program.

1.2. Theoretical Perspective

This research study is informed by critical literacy and its emphasis on (a) valuing, incorporating and building on the knowledge and experiences children bring to school, (b) placing students' responses to books and questions at the center of the curriculum and (c) learning about social issues and taking action to confront inequities (Lewison et al., 2015; Leland et al., 2013; Vasquez et al., 2019). Teachers' decisions about what to read and talk about in their classrooms matter. Vasquez et al. (2019) wrote:

Students who engage in critical literacy from a young age are prepared (1) to make informed decisions regarding issues such as power and control, (2) to engage in the practice of democratic citizenship, and (3) to develop an ability to think and act ethically. (p. 307)

Discussing picture books that "reveal cultural and political realities" can be a powerful way into critical literacy for children (Kissel et al., 2024, p. 53). "Exploratory talk" (Kesler et al., 2020, p. 210) is essential to the development of critical literacy so that teachers and students can build on each other's contributions and hear the perspectives of others to gain new insights. Vasquez emphasized that critical literacy involves "opening up the space" to have conversations about social and political issues (Miller & Kissel, 2019, p. 75).

Supporting teacher candidates so they can facilitate open-ended discussions with their students about inclusive children's literature is therefore central to the work of teacher educators. Kissel et al. (2024) summed this up succinctly when they wrote:

We are called as educators to ensure our classrooms are thinking spaces where children, alongside their teachers, can examine the world through books that, along with windows and mirrors, also provide microscopes and telescopes that focus on our nearby communities and our greater, collective humanity beyond. (p. 59)

1.3. Related Research

Research investigating pre-service teachers' engagement with inclusive children's books is limited. Most of the existing studies focus on responses to inclusive children's literature within university classes and few explore pre-service teachers' actual use of such books in early childhood or elementary grade classroom settings. Studies and descriptions of practice highlight the importance and benefits of providing pre-service teachers with opportunities to read and discuss inclusive books within teacher preparation coursework. These accounts illuminate pre-service teachers' concerns about inclusive children's literature and the impact of various strategies, such as literature circles and text sets, on their beliefs (e.g., Green, 2023; Martin & Spencer, 2020; Pomerantz, 2018; Ricks & Yenika-Agbaw, 2021; Scullin, 2021; Voelker, 2013).

For example, Scullin (2021) developed a children's literature Race Talk Text Set (p. 215) for use in her undergraduate children's literature course, consisting of *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* (Reynolds, 2020) and 11 picture books to develop teacher candidates' knowledge of race and U.S. history and engage in discussions about race and racism. Twenty-two students participated; seven identified as students of color and fifteen identified as white. Scullin's work is situated within the context of research documenting white teacher candidates' resistance to discussing race due to believing racism is a problem of the past, a lack of historical and contemporary knowledge about institutional racism and/or not knowing how to engage in such discussions. Given this resistance, Scullin (2021) wondered:

How can teacher educators provide experiences where PSTs engage in discussions explicitly talking about race? One of the suggestions...is for university classroom instructors to create the right conditions for race talk. Using diverse picture book read-alouds as the context or "condition" for discussions surrounding race talk may have the potential to provide a supportive, scaffolding framework where race talk becomes the norm rather than the exception. (p. 213)

Activities included small group discussions and reading aloud and discussing a picture book about race with an adult or child outside of the class. Participants completed a questionnaire at the end of the course, responding to questions such as "did you find yourself talking with others about race more than you did before the semester began?" and "is there anything from this course that specifically helped you talk about race with others?" (p. 227). Most of the 22 teacher candidates in the class indicated the text set, books and activities increased their ability to talk about race with others and said they planned to read such books with their future students, although a few indicated that they were still uncomfortable and unlikely to do so.

Voelker (2013) examined pre-service teachers' beliefs about selecting children's books in her children's literature course. She utilized a pre- and post-course survey, small focus group discussions and interviews with individual students, as well as audiotaped and transcribed literature discussions of texts that were considered controversial. Additionally, the participants read scholarly articles about censorship and children's literature.

Focusing on one case study, Voelker described Cecile, a sheltered, white, young woman who, on her initial survey, indicated an unwillingness to share books about gay characters or anything that could be deemed controversial, such as violence and curse words. As a result of the course activities, Cecile significantly changed her thinking about the inclusion of these topics in children's books and had "a newfound appreciation for the ability of children's literature to relate to children in all walks of life, including the value of children understanding others' experiences unlike their own" (p. 31).

Some studies have focused on reading aloud picture books with teacher candidates. Ricks and Yenika-Agbaw (2021) implemented interactive read-aloud discussions with teacher candidates enrolled in an undergraduate children's literature course. Three read-aloud book discussions were videorecorded and transcribed. The researchers found that "teacher candidates and their instructor shifted away from riskier topics, seeming to gravitate toward "safer" types of conversations" (p. 6). But when the instructor used simple, open-ended prompts, such as "tell me what you're thinking" or "what do you notice here?", the teacher candidates were more likely to stay in conversation about topics such as power, race/ethnicity, class, and gender (p. 7). Green (2023) described how her approach to reading aloud one particular book to build teacher candidates' confidence related to discussing race and racism. She noted that the teacher candidates in her courses were anxious about discussing these topics with elementary school children but desired to have such discussions: "They know that these conversations are important, but they're also afraid to say the wrong thing". To support their learning, she engaged them in a read aloud and discussion of *That Flag* (Brown, 2023), a picture book about the friendship between a Black child and a white child and how the presence of the confederate flag in the white child's home challenges the friendship. The Black child learns about the history of racism in the U.S. with the flag as catalyst. The character of the teacher in the book, Ms. Greyson, plays a key role in educating her students about the history of the flag and its connection to racism. Green invited the teacher candidates to pay particular attention to the fictional teacher's actions and how the teacher impacted the girls. The character of Ms. Greyson responds to the girls' conflict over the meaning of the flag by stating the truth but not criticizing the white child's family: "The Confederacy fought a war to keep Black people enslaved. Their battle flag is still used by hate groups who want white people to rule". When the white child asks why her family would display such a flag, the teacher responds, "I don't know...it's a good question to ask". Green used Ms. Greyson's response to focus the discussion on "the idea that kindness can't combat structural racism, but teachers can take many additional avenues".

In one of the few studies investigating pre-service teachers' read alouds of inclusive books in classrooms with children, Beneke and Cheatham (2020) explored four white, female teacher candidates' use of inclusive books in fieldwork preschool settings. Their study is informed by work demonstrating that young children may internalize deficit-based messages about dis/ability and race, and talking about books related to these topics may disrupt such thinking. Each participant read aloud two books: A children's picture book with the main character in a wheelchair and a book about racial identity. The researchers interviewed the teacher candidates (TCs) and analyzed transcripts of each read aloud and discussion. They found that the TCs provided little opportunity for the children to contribute their ideas: "By staying close to the texts and employing page turns to manage talk, TCs limited children's participation and evaded direct discussion about the meanings of identity markers (i.e., dis/ability, race)" (p. 256). Interview data suggested the TCs were unsure how to talk about race and dis/ability and had not seen this modeled by mentor teachers in their classrooms. They avoided building on the comments the children made and any extended discussion. The TCs focused their comments on labeling physical differences named in the books and on "sameness", most likely "an attempt to

communicate that people should be treated equitably” (p. 261). Beneke and Cheatham (2020) concluded that teacher educators need to provide more support for TCs “to position young children as language users (as opposed to language recipients), recognizing children’s capacity to wrestle with notions of fairness, consider meanings of dis/ability and race in texts, and trouble notions of normativity” (p. 264). They recommended using retrospective video analysis for reflection and closer partnerships with mentor teachers in support of critical literacy practices.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Prior Study

In the spring of 2023, I conducted a research project to learn from my own classroom discussions about inclusive books with children in grades one through five (ages six–eleven) so I could share my learning and experiences with pre-service teachers. The purpose was to explore how educators can structure conversations about inclusive children’s picture books to nurture critical thinking and empathy, especially when the books or topics feel risky. I conducted 18 discussions with children at a public elementary school in a first/second grade combined classroom (15 students), a fourth/fifth grade combined classroom (15 students), and two groups of third grade students who had the same teacher for literacy (each group had eight students). The school was in a “gateway city”, defined as a midsize urban center that historically “offered residents good jobs and a ‘gateway’ to the American Dream. More recently, Gateway Cities have been reinventing themselves—at times in the face of considerable economic and social challenges” (MassInc Policy Center, n.d.). The state’s gateway cities are home to large numbers of immigrants. The elementary school and the specific classrooms reflected the demographics of the city, with 56.9% of the students identifying as white, 32.5% as Hispanic, 6.1% as multi-racial (non-Hispanic), 2.8% as African American, and 1.6% as Asian (categories determined by the state department of education). The books used included *Blue* (Brew-Hammond, 2022), *My Two Border Towns* (Bowles, 2021), *Grandad’s Camper* (Woodgate, 2021), *The Case for Loving: The Fight for Interracial Marriage* (Alko, 2015), *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001), *When Aidan Became a Brother* (Lukoff, 2019) and *Stitch by Stitch: Cleve Jones and the AIDS Memorial Quilt* (Sanders, 2021).

Findings from this research project indicated that when open-ended questions were used, children responded to the books with empathy and by thinking critically; they built new knowledge connected to state learning standards, asked questions, made inferences, drew on relevant information, and considered implications and point of view. Open-ended discussion prompts based on Chambers (1996) sparked their responses. The findings suggested specific discussion questions to stimulate critical thinking about inclusive children’s picture books and indicated that short book introductions highlighting key vocabulary and concepts provided helpful scaffolding for the discussions (Pomerantz, 2025). The specific prompts included the following:

- Why do you think the author wanted to write this book?
- What caught your attention?
- Was there anything that puzzled or surprised you?
- Why do you think the author called the book____?
- When you think about the book now, after all we’ve said, what is the most important thing about it for you?

2.2. This Study

Drawing on the findings from the research study described above, I recruited teacher candidates in their full-time practicum (student teaching) to participate in an inductive

research study investigating pre-service teachers' perceptions of inclusive children's literature in the current sociopolitical context and their experiences navigating conversations with their students about inclusive children's books. Two teacher candidates volunteered to participate (pseudonyms are used to protect privacy). Elizabeth was a student teacher in grade five (ages 10 and 11) in a gateway city. She identified as white. She conducted her read aloud with a small group of three students. The students identified as Black (1), multi-racial (1), and Asian (1). Jessica was a student teacher employed as a classroom teacher in grade one (ages six and seven). She had a provisional teaching license, which means she passed her state-required teacher tests but had not completed student teaching; she could be hired as a classroom teacher for a year working under her provisional license. She taught in a different gateway city and identified as white. She conducted her read aloud with her entire class of 20 students. The students identified as Hispanic (15), Asian (4), and Black (1). Elizabeth and Jessica obtained consent to read their specific book and audio record the book discussions from their school principals and the parents/guardians of the participating children.

2.3. Procedures

Since Elizabeth and Jessica were in the final semester of their teacher preparation programs, they had already completed literacy development and methods coursework that included the benefits of reading aloud, selecting culturally responsive children's literature and designing and conducting interactive read-aloud lessons. For the purposes of this project, Elizabeth and Jessica separately attended two virtual training sessions with me prior to the read aloud. In the two sessions, I outlined the participation requirements and shared the findings from the project in which I read aloud and discussed inclusive children's picture books with children in grades one through five. I focused on the recommended, open-ended discussion prompts described in the previous section, and the following discussion tips synthesized from my experience in the prior study and the research base about reading aloud and discussing inclusive children's literature (e.g., Edwards & Derman-Sparks, 2020; Daly, 2022; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Van Horn, 2015):

- Before reading, make it clear that students can respond to each other's questions and comments (tell them you are not the only one who can respond to questions in this discussion). They can ask and answer each other's questions and share comments.
- Listen carefully to students' responses;
- Follow the students' lead for where to go next and how much information to share;
- Rephrase and summarize key points made by students;
- Provide context and information about the author/illustrator (if there is an author's note, share it; if not, do some research about the author/illustrator);
- State "I'm interested in why you think that. Can you explain?" if a student expresses a negative remark or biased opinion;
- Address misinformation;
- Share personal experiences when relevant;
- Be honest while emphasizing people are working to make the world a safer place and discuss how we, as a classroom and as individuals, can make our community safer;
- When in doubt, say you will do some research and come back to the students with the information.

Directions for planning the read aloud included determining key vocabulary/concepts, creating a brief book introduction to highlight those concepts, identifying text-specific questions/comments and when to insert them, identifying places to pause in the book to draw attention to key details in illustrations and/or text, and using the open-ended discussion prompts after reading the book. I also provided resources for discussing

challenging topics with children, such as *Nurturing Anti-racist Kids* (Gianapp, 2022), *How to Talk to Kids About What It Means to be Transgender* (Brown, 2016), *Responding to Questions* (Welcoming Schools, n.d. and *Conversations that Matter: Talking with Children about Big World Issues* (Edwards & Derman-Sparks, 2020).

Jessica and Elizabeth then selected an inclusive children's picture book that dealt with race/racism and/or LGBTQIA+ themes or characters. Elizabeth selected the previously described *That Flag* (Brown, 2023). Jessica selected *I Love My Hair!* (Tarpley, 1998) about a Black child's ambivalent feelings about her hair. The child's mother and teacher help her understand her heritage and beauty through the different hairstyles she can have. Jessica and Elizabeth prepared a brief book introduction and discussion questions based on the training. I met with each to review their plan and provide feedback prior to their read aloud.

2.4. Data Sources and Analysis

In addition to the transcriptions of the audiotaped read-aloud and discussion, data sources included Elizabeth and Jessica's pre- and post-surveys about their beliefs based on Voelker (2013) and Pomerantz (2018), as well as written reflections after their read-aloud lessons. The survey is included in Appendix A. Prompts for the reflection included the following:

- What did you notice about the children's responses to the read aloud and discussion?
- What did you notice about yourself during the read aloud and/or discussion?
- Were there any questions or comments that emerged that felt risky or uncomfortable for you? If so, what were they and how did you respond?
- Is there anything you would do differently next time?
- What did you learn or take away from the experience?
- Are there any other thoughts about the experience you would like to share?

Additionally, the participants informally shared information about their school contexts relevant to their book selection choices during the training sessions. I recorded this information in research memos.

An analysis of the pre-and post-surveys and written reflections was conducted using this focus question as a guide: How do pre-service teachers perceive inclusive children's literature in the current political, social and educational context? Data analysis consisted of comparing participants' responses on their pre- and post-surveys to note any shifts in thinking and then comparing the survey data with the written reflections for patterns and/or inconsistencies. The read-aloud and discussion transcripts and the written reflections were analyzed to answer the second focal research question: What successes/challenges did the teacher candidates' experience as they navigated conversations with their students about inclusive children's books? Process coding was used in data analysis of the two read-aloud lesson transcripts to describe what the teacher and students were carrying out (Saldana, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Saldana (2009) described process coding as using gerunds ("-ing" words) "exclusively to connote action in the data...simple observable activity (e.g., reading, playing, watching TV, drinking coffee) and more general conceptual action (e.g., struggling, negotiating, surviving, adapting)..." (p. 77). As Corbin and Strauss (2015) explained: "Process is an important aspect of analysis because it gives life to action-interaction" (p. 174), such as read-aloud discussions. Corbin and Strauss (2015) recommended beginning with a concept and comparing data with the concept to develop the codes. Thus, the initial round of coding for the teacher talk during the lessons derived from comparing what the teacher candidate said to the discussion tips shared with them during the training:

- Following the students' lead

- Rephrasing and summarizing key points made by students
- Providing context
- Addressing misinformation
- Sharing personal experiences
- Being honest

The students' responses and contributions were coded using the process codes derived from Pomerantz (2025). In this prior study, the initial codes derived from the concept of critical thinking as defined by Paul and Elder (2020). Additional process codes emerged from the data. The final list of codes to describe the students' responses included the following:

- Questioning (vocabulary, content of text or related content, illustrations)
- Connecting (to other books, personal experience, prior knowledge, curriculum standards)
- Clarifying (peer to peer, teacher to student)
- Articulating insights
- Inferring (point of view/perspective, theme, meaning of some aspect of the text, such as the title or feelings about characters)
- Evaluating
- Considering implications

Each teacher candidates' written reflection was then compared to the findings from her lesson transcript for themes and/or inconsistencies. Finally, the two cases were compared to note any similarities or differences. Each case is presented separately in the next section, followed by a discussion of cross-case themes and implications.

3. Results

3.1. Elizabeth's Beliefs

Elizabeth's pre- and post-surveys indicated a firm belief in the value of sharing inclusive books with children. She was willing to share children's books containing gay or transgender characters, books that discuss race or racism or books that contain references to war or violence. She was strongly against book removal from school and classroom libraries. She felt confident that she could select quality children's literature and would know what to do if a parent or school administrator challenged a book she read or provided to children in her class. She strongly agreed with the statement: Stories presenting real life struggles and challenges are an acceptable part of childhood reading. There were no changes between her pre- and post-surveys except for her response to the statement: If parents object to their child reading or hearing a particular book, the teacher should acquiesce and find alternatives for that particular child. She answered unsure on the pre-survey and agreed with the statement on the post-survey.

3.2. Elizabeth's Observations

Elizabeth's choice of the book *That Flag* (Brown, 2023) also reflected her willingness to use inclusive children's literature about racism, and she seemed to find validation for her belief in the value of such literature through the read-aloud experience. She noted the high level of engagement of the students and wrote:

I noticed a positive reaction to representation in the book, specifically of wearing bonnets at night. One of my students was excited about the page where we see the main character Kiara sitting in bed wearing a bonnet. She then shared with the group that she also wears a bonnet [to protect curly hair] so she was happy the character in the story was wearing one as well.

She also noted that “students are more open to these conversations” than she originally thought and were capable of thinking and talking about social justice and racism. She admired their capacity for close observation of and inferential thinking about illustrations. However, she also experienced a level of discomfort she hadn’t expected. She wrote:

The other thing that stood out to me was how ‘taboo’ it felt to be having conversations about the confederacy and racial discrimination in my school. Although having these conversations with students is something I feel strongly about, they are not something that is typical for my school. While reading the story, especially the pages that were more intense (depicted racism or racist imagery—like the confederate flag or the Civil Rights protests), it felt as though I was talking about something I shouldn’t be...I was surprised I felt this way because of how much I love the book I chose and its message, as well as how excited I was to share it with my students.

3.3. Key Findings: Elizabeth

Elizabeth implemented the open-ended questions discussed in the training and, in response, the students made connections to the curriculum, inferred characters’ feelings and the author’s purpose, evaluated the content of the book and articulated insights about why it was important to learn about the history of the confederate flag. Elizabeth provided important contextual information about the confederate flag and drew attention to key details and vocabulary during reading. However, she missed multiple opportunities to follow the students’ lead, deepen thinking and build knowledge related to historical and contemporary racism. Part of the book depicts a class trip to a museum about slavery and its legacy, and the central character, Kiara, is accompanied by her father. He is portrayed looking troubled at the cotton gin exhibit. On the page following, he looks even more troubled at the slave auction block exhibit. When Elizabeth asked, “what caught your attention in the story?” after finishing the book, the following conversation ensued about those powerful illustrations:

Student One: On the field trip they included that stuff even though they probably know that the Black people would come and observe as well.

Elizabeth: Yeah, those pages and all the really significant things. (Calls on another student)

Student Two: If you flip back a page, I realized that at the cotton thing, her father looks nervous for some reason.

Elizabeth: Why do we think that might be?

Student One: Maybe it had to do with something during slavery.

At this point, Elizabeth moved on to her next question without following the lead that the students gave her to discuss the significance of the cotton gin and the other items in the museum and why the father might respond the way he did. But Student Two persisted a few moments later, stating: “I’m confused on why the father was so upset about the cotton thing...I’m not really sure what it is, but he seems pretty upset when [Kiara] saw it”. Again, Elizabeth steered away from the question and any explanation of the cotton gin by saying “we see that in the illustration” and then called on another student. That student picked up the theme of Kiara’s parents being upset in a different illustration where they hugged Kiara “tight” and for “an extra-long time” before the museum field trip. The student inferred “maybe they knew what it had inside”. But once again, Elizabeth moved away from the topic of the museum artifacts and the experiences of Black children and families grappling with slavery and racism, even though the students recognized the

importance of these illustrations and the strong feelings conveyed and wanted to dig deeper into the meaning.

This pattern of missed opportunities persisted throughout the discussion. When Elizabeth read the author's note and asked for reactions, one of the students responded:

It was inspiring. It touched me, because I understand how she wants kids to understand, because there's some things that kids don't understand but can be really important. Parents might not wanna share that with their children cause it's a heavy topic, but maybe it is good to share that stuff with children so they can learn.

Another student then shared "I'd like to add on...that she wants the children to actually know what happened before and how hatred – basically, like the world was and how they tried to bring it back together". These comments provided opportunities to explore (a) why it might be "good" to learn about the history of the confederate flag and racism and (b) the persistence of racism in contemporary life (not just historical, as the child's use of the past tense implied). But there was no follow-up on these leads provided by the children.

Elizabeth's reflection demonstrated insight and self-awareness about her challenges with the discussion. She admitted to struggling "with responding to student answers". A moment in which a student described the point of view of the family with the confederate flag and she did not follow up stood out to her as uncomfortable. She explained:

When asked about what the confederate flag means to one of the families in the book, I had a student explain that a person may be proud of a racist heritage. They said, "this is just a prediction, but they (Bianca's family) are proud of themselves for not being with the Black community". When I re-listened to the recording this did not stand out to me as risky or uncomfortable but in the moment of reading, having a student express a racist ideal (even though it was not one they held just one that they were pointing out was portrayed in the story) felt uncomfortable to me.

She also noticed other instances where she did not take the opportunity to follow the students' lead. She wrote:

A student made an inference about cotton having a connection to African American history based on how the father in the story reacted to his daughter commenting on wanting to pick it in the museum. I did not comment on this because I liked that she was able to come to this conclusion on her own, and I wanted to see if other students would chime in about this. However, while reflecting I think it would have been better for me to have jumped in and provided some context to why that might be. I also think I would have pushed some of my students to think a little harder about some of the topics they brought up. I wish I had asked more deeper-level thinking questions in response to the answers students gave to my questions...if I were to do this again, I would definitely feel more confident coming up with follow-up questions to students' responses on the spot.

Although listening to the audio version of the read-aloud was not specified as a requirement, it was clear from her reflection that Elizabeth did so and gained important insights as a result.

3.4. Jessica's Beliefs

Jessica's pre- and post-surveys indicated a strong belief in the value of sharing inclusive books with children. She did not shy away from sharing books with gay or transgender characters or books that discussed racism, war or violence. She was strongly

against book removal from school and classroom libraries but unsure she would know what to do if challenged. Her choice of *I Love My Hair!* (Tarpley, 1998) demonstrated her interest in sharing children's literature about self-acceptance and Black culture/history. Jessica's first choice of books was *Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019), a book highlighting the relationship between a father and daughter as he cares for her hair, instead of a mother as in *I Love My Hair!* However, when Jessica requested permission to read the book from her supervisor, the supervisor asked her to read *I Love My Hair!* instead because it was part of the school's first-grade curriculum.

3.5. Jessica's Observations

Jessica's reflection on her read-aloud lesson and experience confirmed her positive view about sharing inclusive children's literature. She wrote she had a "great time" and stated:

I learned that even though students might not relate to the characters in the book directly (if they are not Black), then they still can relate to a lot of the events that occur in the book. I also learned that a lot of my students are able to empathize with characters in the book to feel how the characters are feeling.

Jessica noted the many connections students were able to make to the text, such as "text-to-self connections of times when their mom hurt their hair when they brushed it, how their dad used to have an Afro and get made fun of for it, how others have sometimes made fun of the way they look too". Like Elizabeth, the read-aloud experience confirmed Jessica's positive views about the benefits of sharing inclusive children's books.

3.6. Key Findings: Jessica

The first-grade students made many connections during the read aloud of the book and responded with comments and questions related to the text and pictures, such as "this whole part is nice"; "one time, my mom do the same, brushed my hair like in the book"; and "I have a question. What is this?" in response to an illustration of a spinning wheel. Jessica followed the students' leads in these cases by offering clarifications and affirming their connections. She also drew attention to key vocabulary and details, offering explanations of "Afro" and the phrase "hair as a blessing" during the read aloud. After reading, she used open-ended prompts suggested in the training sessions that led the children to make inferences as in the following exchange:

Jessica: What is the most important thing about this book for you?

Student: To love your hair.

Multiple students expressed agreement and then Jessica asked: "What else is important about this book?" A student responded, "The most important thing there, you say you like your hair, but you need to like all your body". Again, multiple students agreed, and Jessica summarized and extended this key point by stating: "Even if you are the only one who looks like you. Right? We all look different, just like her hair was different than her class. We all look different in different ways". A student picked up this theme and connected it to skin color. Jessica again summarized by saying "Are you both beautiful? Yeah. Even though you look different, and you have different colored skin and different hair".

After reading, Jessica revisited the section of the text where the main character is teased about wearing her hair in an Afro and her teacher comforts her by saying:

When she was growing up, folks counted their hair as a blessing. Wearing an Afro was a way for them to stand up for what they believed, to let the world know that they were proud of who they were, and where they came from. (Tarpley, 1998)

Jessica led into the discussion of this passage by stating “this book actually has a history lesson in it”. The students immediately made connections to Black history month. Jessica reminded students “when we talked about Black history, we talked about how Black people used to be treated differently”. She provided context:

Afros were important to people who were Black. It had to do with Black culture. In history, when people would wear their hair as an Afro, some people would think it's not okay, so Black people often felt pressured to change their hair based on how people wanted them to look...some Black people would wear their hair in an Afro style to symbolize, that means to show, that even though their hair was different than white people's, they still loved their hair.

Students responded by making many connections to what they had learned previously about segregation and racism, such as different water fountains and bus seats for Black people. One student stated: “Many years ago, my dad had an Afro and when he was at school, people made fun of him, and they told him to get a different hairstyle”. Jessica summarized this key point and followed up by asking “how did that make your dad feel?” and when the child responded “sad”, Jessica emphasized this, saying “probably sad and upset, right?” Jessica did not avoid conversations about racism and explicitly drew students' attention to this aspect of the book, even though it is only referenced once in the story.

Jessica acknowledged that the interactive discussion format was new for the students. After reading the story aloud, she stated: “Everybody can have a discussion now. During this discussion, if friends ask questions or say something, you can answer each other. Okay? This is something different that we have not done before”. The relative newness of the format may explain why she sometimes missed opportunities to invite students to elaborate on their responses and instead would elaborate herself and move on. For example, when she asked if students had questions or comments about the book, the following exchange took place:

Student: I liked the book, and I liked her hair and her teacher at school.

Jessica: Yeah, so the teacher at school, when the students at school were making fun of her hair, the teacher made her feel better and told her that her hair is a blessing, right? ...the teacher was nice and made her feel better about her hair. Anything else about the book?

Instead of asking the student why she liked the character of the teacher, Jessica provided the explanation, essentially taking the opportunity for thinking, talking and elaboration away from the student. Another missed opportunity occurred when a student stated the girl in the story did not like her hair because “she has different hair than them”. Instead of asking the student to explain further and identify “them”, Jessica took over and said, “when she goes to school her hair is different than other people in her class” and then Jessica moved on to another question. When the student said, “you need to like all your body”, Jessica restated and emphasized the point but did not follow up by asking why.

Jessica's reflection showed limited insight into her tendency to speak for the students and not ask them to elaborate, but she stated:

Students really did not talk AMONG each other and have conversations with each other about the topic. They did not talk about each other's responses or answer each other's questions. I had to facilitate the next talking point for my students.

Her sense of needing to facilitate the next talking point may have contributed to her pattern of jumping in when the students could have carried out more of the thinking and talking. She also wrote:

I was not always sure how to make the discussions deeper. I felt like students were not getting into the topic as much as I would have hoped, but I also felt like I did not know how to enrich the conversation.

Although Jessica seemed to think deeply about the discussion and may have listened to the recording, it was not evident from the reflection that she did so.

4. Discussion

4.1. Scaffolds for Discussing Inclusive Children's Books

Elizabeth and Jessica had strong positive beliefs about the value of inclusive children's literature, perhaps shaped by their education course work, which emphasized culturally responsive and sustaining teaching practices and texts throughout the program. Voelker (2013), Pomerantz (2018) and Scullin (2021) demonstrated the benefits of structured discussions and course activities designed to engage teacher candidates with inclusive children's books and consider their beliefs. Elizabeth and Jessica likely participated in such activities prior to student teaching.

Chambers' (1996) open-ended discussion prompts were a useful scaffold for Elizabeth and Jessica's discussions, eliciting many examples of participation and critical thinking from their students. Unlike the teacher candidates in Beneke and Cheatham's (2020) study, Elizabeth and Jessica provided opportunities for children to contribute their ideas by using the open-ended questions and directly discussed racism, although without the follow-up that might have led to deeper thinking and understanding. In the current sociopolitical climate where organized resistance to and self-censorship of inclusive children's books are all too common, educators need support for how to approach conversations that may feel risky. The scaffolds provided to Elizabeth and Jessica through the study procedures suggest supports that can help teachers create space for discussing challenging topics. Even teachers in states with divisive concepts' laws limiting the use and discussion of inclusive books can use the approach for discussion described in this study with other kinds of books to structure classroom conversations so that their students can openly share their thinking.

4.2. Implications

Both teacher candidates experienced challenges during the discussions related to following their students' leads. Elizabeth's lack of confidence about discussing racism led her to move on quickly from topics that felt uncomfortable. Jessica's tendency to do the thinking and explaining for the students closed off opportunities for them to elaborate. These findings suggest that the skillful implementation of discussions about inclusive books needs greater emphasis in teacher preparation programs. Elizabeth's experience indicates more practice with such discussions might help build confidence to talk about racism with her students. Jessica's lesson suggests more practice with elaboration strategies (such as asking "why" when a student makes a statement) might help her extend students' thinking and support language development. Such practice could be built into teacher preparation coursework.

Prior to this year, teacher candidates were only required to plan and conduct one or two interactive read-aloud lessons prior to student teaching, and an inclusive children's book was not specifically mandated. Although most teacher candidates also had the experience of reading aloud during their student teaching experience, the program supervisor was not required to observe or provide feedback on such a lesson and could observe any lesson and any subject area. However, this year, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2024) initiated a requirement that supervisors observe each candidate conducting a lesson involving "high-quality, culturally relevant,

complex texts...rich in academic language, [that] provide diverse and nuanced perspectives and promote critical thinking". As demonstrated by Elizabeth and Jessica's case studies, this new emphasis and the potential it creates for additional practice and feedback are important supports for teacher candidates. The new "complex text" requirement also states that the teacher must be observed providing opportunities for students to practice "increasingly complex oral language through extended discussion" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2024). As illustrated by the case studies, teacher candidates would benefit from more targeted feedback about their responses to students during discussion and ways to support language development and extend thinking.

The fact that Elizabeth listened to her recording and reflected on what she heard resulted in important insights into her need to follow up on students' questions and responses. As a result of Beneke and Cheatham's (2020) study, they recommended the use of video as a tool to promote teacher candidates' reflection on interactive read alouds about race and dis/ability. Similarly, Elizabeth's case study suggests that the formal integration of recording, listening and reflecting into the interactive read-aloud experience would be beneficial for teacher candidates. Specific reflection prompts could be used to draw attention to teacher talk that promotes or closes off extended thinking and language use, as well as to note any missed opportunities for clarifying and building knowledge related to the topic. To ensure that the learning gained from the experience is applied, a second read-aloud could be conducted with a similar reflection process. There is promising evidence that the use of video recording as an aid to reflection in teacher education is beneficial (e.g., González et al., 2020; Roller, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2010). Future research might investigate video-aided reflection specifically related to conducting interactive read alouds about inclusive children's literature and how such reflection might be integrated into teacher preparation.

Finally, these case studies highlight the need for schools and mentor teachers in states without divisive concepts' legislation to support teacher candidates by modeling discussions about inclusive children's books. Teacher candidates need to routinely observe mentor teachers reading aloud books about race and racism and other topics that may feel risky and engaging in conversations with their students in ways that promote critical thinking and language development. Elizabeth said she had never observed a discussion about race or racism in her classroom. Jessica told the children that they were performing something "new" by having an extended discussion in which they could respond to each other. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, her supervisor told her not to read *Hair Love* (Cherry, 2019) because *I Love My Hair!* (Tarpley, 1998) was already in the curriculum. Reading two books on the same topic allows opportunities for making connections and knowledge building, but the supervisor closed the door on these possibilities in favor of adhering closely to the curriculum. Teacher preparation programs must work closely with partner schools and mentor teachers to align expectations regarding reading and discussing complex, culturally responsive and sustaining texts, so teacher candidates attain state policy goals supported by the research and recommendations of national and international professional associations.

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Appendix A. Survey (Adapted from Voelker, 2013)

Place an X in the Box That Best Represents Your Opinion on the Question.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion or Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am confident that I can recognize quality children’s literature.					
I am confident that I would know what to do if a parent or school administrator challenged a book I read or provided to children in my class.					
If parents object to their child reading or hearing a particular book, the teacher should acquiesce and find alternatives for that particular child.					
When parents object to a book the teacher is reading aloud to a class, the teacher should select another book for the class.					
When parents object to a book children are reading independently from the classroom or school library, the teacher or the librarian should remove the book so no child has access.					
A teacher should choose to read books that present all kinds of families, including those with same sex parents.					
I would not read or provide books to children in which the characters drink alcohol.					
I would not read or provide books to children in which the characters are gay.					
I would not read or provide books to children in which the characters are transgender.					
Stories presenting real life struggles and challenges are an acceptable part of childhood reading.					
I would not read or provide books to children in which the characters break the law.					
I would not read or provide books to children in which race or racism are discussed.					
I would not read or provide books to children that contain references to war or violence.					

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