



Centering Race in Literary Studies in the Kindergarten Classroom

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Introduction

Literary Studies has historically used a colorblind approach. With this approach, race is not explicitly named, often dismisses difference by race, and the outcomes perpetuate segregation and a hierarchy of race. This is highly problematic for me and for the education of my students. As a kindergarten teacher, it is my goal to create a community within the four walls of my classroom. A community that not only includes everyone but embodies the true spirit of a community. We learn through many different lenses. We are explorers, investigators, scientists, mathematicians, literary scholars, and, most importantly, we are a community. My community is Oberle Elementary School which is a public elementary school in the Christina School District in New Castle County, Delaware. Oberle is one of fourteen elementary schools in Christina School District. The district is the largest district in the state, largely suburban with a handful of schools in an urban setting. There are close to 650 students enrolled, at Oberle. The school represents a diverse mixture of ethnicity's, including 55% Hispanic and 28% African American population. At Oberle, 56% of the students qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch Program. The students at Oberle have access to all the academic's required for an Elementary school in Delaware. As a fully inclusive school, students of different ability levels are in my classroom, so I must ensure that all my lessons can be easily differentiated. The students are given different opportunities to apply their skills based on their abilities. This unit will redirect my literary studies focus away from a colorblind approach towards a race-centered approach.

Rationale

The ELA curriculum leaves room for teachers to select stories they might see fit to teach the skill of the week. The district provides a list of books that will work with the skill; however, I have discovered that the books typically have the same story told over and over again. The books lack diversity in their images and storylines, and often fail to give students meaningful ways of talking about race and racism. It is my job to make sure that I expose my students to diverse stories and to introduce new reading practices that do not simply reproduce the colorblind model of reading. This makes the challenge for me to create a unit (and future units) that have a race-centered approach as well as for all students to learn early on more critical vocabulary of

race.

The goal for this unit is to create an engaging experience for the students that not only incorporates basic writing and reading skills as well as develop critical thinking skills. This unit will include scaffolding as the students' progress which will allow the students to learn on their level. This unit will also lead the continuous education of the students and staff in my classroom about culture, heritage, and race. The displays in my classroom will be reflective of the lessons covered. In addition, I plan to make sure this unit helps to encourage our school librarian to incorporate more culturally inclusive and allow students to see themselves in the stories we read. I will provide the librarian with lists of texts that will help to create this environment.

Learning Objectives

In the English Language Arts, students are expected to be able to describe the connection between texts and point out the similarities and differences of those texts. This unit will expand students understanding of texts that they may not be familiar with. The unit will challenge them to see beyond the norm and start to question why those were the norms. It will allow the students to become true critical thinkers. The unit will show the importance of race-centered reading practices in the elementary school. It will require a huge undertaking by both myself and the students but when they move onto other more difficult texts throughout their education, they will have a better understanding on how to dissect literature for greater gains. As a part of the unit, students will be keeping a visual (drawings or writing) journal that not only allows them to get their ideas down onto paper, it will also allow them to use their creative energy towards the common goal of identifying parts of the stories that are similar and different.

Teacher Background Knowledge

Colorblindness and Race Neutrality

Teachers who adopt CBRI are likely to avoid racial questions or comments from students because they are “uncomfortable” or “sensitive” and because they believe in emphasizing “sameness” over difference. However, teachers who dismiss students' questions or comments about race, fearing that they will introduce prejudice into the child's life or assuming that differences do not matter, thwart the child's ability to engage in constructive discourse and to develop critical thinking on the subject.¹

When you hear “colorblind” or “race neutrality” what do you think? For most, you assume that this is a good practice. Colorblindness and race neutrality indicate that race is not explicitly named and has little to no impact on society. The true problem with these words is that they are actively dismissing the differences of race and the outcomes that will continue to perpetuate segregation and hierarchy. The terms create segregation under the guise of the language of neutrality. In the classroom, bringing awareness to racism or a

consciousness to racism is to engage students to question and evaluate power and our society. It is important to know that neutrality does not equal justice and treating unequal conditions equally will only reproduce inequality. Lifting the veil of colorblindness allows you to examine the impact and not just the intent. Ultimately, this allows the focus to move from being on the process but allowing you to examine the power.

We must examine power in all disciplines, however, in this unit I will address it through the humanities. Felice Blake speaks of this very idea in her article, "Why Black Lives Matter in the Humanities" from the book *Seeing Race Again*. Blake explains it is not enough to just include populations that have been excluded but also change our approach to reading. She uses the example of *The Color Purple* written by Alice Walker asking, "did we think critically about the novel's profound concern with the vulnerability and the complexities of poor black community's even as we championed Black creativity?"² It is with this question I see the change to my own thinking. One way to change our approach is to acknowledge when something was not right and using the statement, "The United States was wrong about..." or substituting a person's name for the United States. Even admitting that I was wrong about... allows students to see that it is ok to be imperfect, vulnerable and that no one is infallible. We teach our students that it is ok to question whether something is appropriate or just or moral, then we provide the students to use the analyzation skills to seek the truth about different subjects. In this ELA unit, my focus must be on the telling and retelling of stories that give some insight into where the author has been as well as where they are going.

We read not simply to marvel at the creativity of literariness, but to do so in ways to acknowledge that power as it articulates new ways of being, knowing and engaging. Race -conscious reading practices point us toward a reorientation and transformation of the humanities and of the university itself. A revitalized humanities studying & documenting how people process human experience would be poised to set forth a new vision of possibility.³

Blake understood exactly what reading should look like in the classroom. She references the university but the same is true on every level of education and the importance of acknowledging the power each book we read has over us. It reminds me of the telling of the story of the three little pigs. In the many versions of the book, each pig makes a house, one of sticks, one of straw and the other of bricks. The story continues with the villain, "The Big, Bad Wolf" coming to get the little pigs. Ultimately, the story is about the outsmarting of the wolf. However, in *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka, the story is told from the point of view of the wolf. (Spoiler alert: the wolf had allergies and although the pigs thought he was after them, he was just looking to make some friends.) When I use these stories to teach sequence of events, I also teach the students that sometimes what appears to be the truth in one story is only the truth of the storyteller. I am sure that many stories shared with our students have different points of view and it is complicated to show our students how one's point of view can change their interpretation of events. This is essential to helping our students learn that we need to not only include different points of view, but we need to see how important these points of view are to the community.

Schools

Grace Lee Boggs described the dominant model of schools as a "factory model of education"⁴ in which schools served as a pipeline from the classroom to the factory. Students would sit through hours of lecture where they would be given all the information, they needed to be successful. Teachers would stand at the front of the room and provided students with all the material they would need as they moved forward in their lives. The

problem arose that this version of school was not beneficial for the students to learn and grow. Freedom Schooling however is offering up many sites of learning and engagement that go beyond the classroom. The focus is that students and teachers are exchanging knowledge on a horizontal axis. Allowing students to be active makers of knowledge and shaper of social life.

Curriculum

The very nature of our current curriculum design makes it impossible to value and honour the rich culture, tradition, and familial experience each child brings with them in the classroom.⁵

Much of modern history curriculum is about the United States, it around colonialism and the establishment of this country through the eyes of those in power. Although most history books mention slavery and the civil war, they leave out the fact that all slaves were not free until June 19, 1865 which was two years following Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and 5 months after the passing of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. The Civil Rights Movement is introduced, what is left out is that the fight for Civil Rights did not end with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In fact, many of the rights that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and so many others fought for are still being fought for by many groups including the Black Lives Matter Movement. If we look at any of the creative arts curriculum, there is still a focus around a "whiteness" or the thought that the products created by people of color are not as crucial to our society because it is not the "norm". As we look at curriculum, we must analyze it for what it is trying to tell us and not what it is simply written. In the article, *Teaching K-8 Students about Race*, it points out that "...what makes the history curriculum a central space for debating issues of representation, national history, and race is that most if not all U.S. citizens are expected at one time or another to read, sing, and learn a common narrative of American history in school."⁶ We expect all citizens to know that basics of American History but leave out the impact that some of the citizens had on the country. It is our job as teachers to expand our knowledge and challenge the curriculum to present all sides of history as one cohesive history. Not one of the different sides of history happen independent of the others. In fact, when we review most of history, we will see how they work together to show the whole picture of history.

An obstacle in our approach to teaching about race and racism is that it can be extremely uncomfortable to have open discussions about these topics. Do not get me wrong, I know how uncomfortable it is to have these discussions, but it is our obligation to our students to learn and grow as they are learning and growing. Not only must we go looking for this information, we must bring it back to our schools and districts to assist in the change throughout the system. I know that teaching race and racism may seem like a difficult subject especially for our younger learners, however, it is possible that this may not only assist with the students interactions with each other but extend into their homes where they will be share what they are learning. Teaching social justice requires that we change how we teach so that we can create an environment that produces active and engaged learners. Using different mediums (newspapers, magazines, online journals, blogs, etc.), also will allow the student to become more engaged in the learning because they will see how history or racism affects them in their world.

Teaching Strategies

When I begin to unpack how I want to teach any unit, I ask myself “how will I get my students attention?” This unit will allow me to expand my different teaching strategies and try some different approaches. Many of the skills I will focus on are skills that apply to every ELA lesson I teach, however with the focus on community, it will also have a link to the Social Standards. First, students will be given the opportunity to ask and answer questions about the stories we read. They will need to focus on the key ideas and details from the texts. The students will work to integrate their knowledge or ideas to compare the narrative elements of familiar stories and the retelling of those stories. Many of these opportunities will lead to a focus on speaking and listening which is a major foundation of kindergarten.

In addition, I will use visualization using art and music to allow the students to refocus and prepare for the day’s instruction. The students will also use their visual journals to make notes or create their own form of art in response to what they see and hear. As I always include in my instruction, I will provide differentiated instruction. The students will use a variety of approaches, whether working in individually or small groups. The pacing and support provided will be adjusted to ensure that all students are engaged and actively participating throughout the learning. Students will be given opportunities to work in cooperative groups to complete assignments and activities. This will allow students to work together taking on various roles based on the lessons with a focus on success for all.

Unit Overview

Prior to the beginning of this unit, the students will have already read and learned that most of the stories taught will show characters, setting, and have a beginning, middle and end. Once the students have become proficient at being able to identify those pieces. We will expand their critical thinking skills to be able to compare and contrast different stories that have a similar story but are written in different languages or cultures. Using the knowledge, the students have about different fairy tales will allow them to further explore how each of these stories address morality and storytelling.

In this unit, we will start by reading, *Red Riding Hood* by James Marshall. The students and I will examine the story and identify the parts of the story. We will then read additional stories that are similar to Red Riding Hood from other areas. The students will look for the similarities and the differences. After seeing the basic differences between cultures and their story telling, I will then introduce additional pieces of literature that allow the students to see a different perspective of life. Using books such as *My Hands Sing the Blues: Romare Bearden’s Childhood Journey*, we will explore the stories offering the students an unique opportunity to learn and discuss experiences of racism and visions of racial justice and to learn how important it is to not just tolerate other races but understand and show how essential these stories are to our society.

By the end of this unit, students will be able to speak about specific experiences of race and racism and have a better understanding and be able to share their knowledge with those that are around them. The students will walk out of my classroom with a head full of knowledge and the ability to access that knowledge to apply to the rest of their schooling and life. One day I hope they see how this unit and units similar to this are beneficial to the world we live in. They will be able to share their love for all literature with everyone they encounter. This unit is designed to integrate social studies concepts with the reading standards that are required for all teachers to use in their classroom. By using these standards, it creates a cross-curricular unit plan. With little to no specific instruction around our social studies, this will create a true cross-curricular unit

for Kindergarten. This unit will create curriculum that has never been available for the students. The unit will incorporate activities for the students as well as assessments that will benefit the students in kindergarten.

This unit will create an engaging experience for the students that not only incorporates basic writing and reading skills as well as develop critical thinking skills. This unit will include scaffolding as the students' progress which allows the students to learn on their level. My goal is to create a unit is to not just support the current standards within my classroom but to help students to be able to disrupt the norms in their experiences. Ultimately, this unit will help to shape and have a positive effect on consciences. I will spend my time working through this unit and the rest of my curriculum to ensure that the lessons I am teaching are not exclusionary and allow all students to be heard. My goal is to have a classroom environment and pedagogy that can liberate, transform, and empower my students.

Changes in the Classroom Environment

In the struggle to create an environment that does not continue to focus on the colonial standard that most of us are comfortable with, where can we start? The idea that we must decolonize our library and not just our readings, while focusing on expanding our reading practices. Literature is designed to shape the cultural meaning and identity. It is the product of the knowledge of ourselves. The expansion of our reading repertoire must extend to realizing that there is not one voice to share their experiences of their community but taking many voices to see how each is impacted and part of the community.

In addition, we must analyze the items we bring into our classroom for use with our students. As we work to create an environment that is beneficial for all our students, it is important that we take the opportunity to expose the students to many different artists, musicians, and ways of thinking. It takes more than a simple modification to one lesson in our history unit to allow to change how we approach an Anti-Racist classroom.

An example of this could look like this: when students enter the classroom, music from the different genres and artists like *A Tribe Called Red* or *La Santa Cecilia* will allow the students to hear music that may not be familiar to them and will allow them to challenge their own sense of music norms. My goal is for the students to explore their knowledge of music and see how music can relate to all facets of their life. Students may start their morning writing in their visual journal about a piece of art that is projected onto the whiteboard from the artists Ramiro Gomez or Titus Kaphar that gives them access to a different understanding of art. Using that piece of music or art to further the understanding that we must look past the basic idea and look for the deeper-rooted ideals in everything we do. The use of music and art not only allows students to begin their day thinking outside of the typical language arts lesson but also is a great way to get the students hooked into the lesson. It can also help students to be more excited about learning in the classroom.

Classroom Activities

Each of the activities may be used in a virtual as well as in a in person school setting. I find that it is extremely important to create curriculum that is adaptable for any type of setting we might have and the national pandemic we are currently dealing with it is important to be prepared.

Introduction of Unit

The unit will begin with me reading, *Same, Same but Different* by Jenny Sue Kostecki-Shaw which will allow us to start a conversation about race and colorblindness. After we read the book, we will spend some time defining these new terms for the students. We will create a vocabulary page for them to be able to use throughout the unit. We will start with race, colorblindness, and community. I will give the students an opportunity to help come up with the definitions so that they are in student friendly language. The page will have room for the students to add additional words as we move throughout the unit.

A View of our Community

We will use maps to identify observations about community. We will start by looking at a map of the United States, the Mid-Atlantic, Delaware and our neighborhood. For each of the maps, we will discuss what they see on the map, any differences that they might notice, and about community. When discussing community, we will talk about how the community changes as we switch maps. I will use chart paper to display the key points the students bring up. When we get to our neighborhood map, we will discuss specifics of the area. I will point out the local stores, clubs and where our homes are on the map. I will explain to the students' the type of places every community has in it. In addition, we will extend our learning to discuss the indigenous history of Delaware, the contemporary presence of Native people and nations and historic African American communities in our area. This would lead us to going on a field trip (virtual/actual) to Iron Hill Science Center which is less than fifteen minutes from our school. On this site, they provide lessons about the Lenni Lenape Tribes of Delaware. The Iron Hill School was one of 80 schools built for African American children between 1919-1928 by Pierre Samuel du Pont is also housed on the same property.

What makes a community?

For this activity, I would start by reading *My Hands Sing the Blues: Romare Bearden's Childhood Journey* by Jeanne Walker Harvey. After reading this book, we will discuss how this book shows Romare Bearden's life through the use of Bearden's art. I will then ask students to create their own presentation that will explain who they are and what their community looks like to them. It will be an open project so that students will have general directions but will be allowed to create/present it in any manner they would like to and that they are comfortable creating. The directions will include talking about their family heritage, favorites, and must include a picture (drawn or printed) of themselves. I will encourage them to be as creative as possible and share as much as they would like to with their classmates. The students will present in front of the entire class and then be paired up with classmates so they can compare themselves to each other. They will spend the time discussing how their differences make them unique and how those differences come together to create our community in the classroom.

Visual Journal

The visual journal could be a composition book, a notebook, or even created in a digital media to allow access for all students. Students will be asked to keep a visual journal throughout the school year. At multiple points during the unit, the students will be asked to write, draw, or sketch out their response. This journal will allow the students to express their ideas however they choose. It is important for students to be able to answer a prompt or question without worrying about the words specifically. It is so important that at their age they feel like they are being understood. The Visual Journal is a way that I can make sure the students are engaged in learning and address any concerns the students might have with the current lesson.

Picture Walks

My students and I will take a picture walk of the book for the day prior to reading it. During the walk we will use what we have learned about story structure and the author's purpose to begin our discussions. We will discuss what characters might be in the story, where the story may take place, some details the pictures might give away, and make educated guesses about why the author may have written the book. The students will draw their prediction of what the story is about in their visual journal. Then, I will read the book and then we will see if our observations during the picture/book walk were correct.

Read Aloud

As I continue to have daily read aloud time, I will incorporate several books. I will start with the stories of red riding hood. I would start with James Marshall's version, then move onto *Petite Rogue: A Cajun Red Riding Hood* by Mike Artell, *Pretty Selma: A Little Red Riding Hood Story from Africa* by Niki Daly and *Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood Story from China* by Ed Young and use a graphic organizer that allows the students to be able to compare several stories at the same time. It will look like a t-chart with multiple columns. The top of the chart will have the name of each story. On the left side of the chart there will be four sections, Setting, Characters, Details, and Something I noticed. The first three sections are easy for the students to answer. The last sections give the students the opportunity to point out something unique they may have noticed or even a question they might have about the book. They might also have some insight when comparing the stories. I will also use their visual journal here to minimize the stress for students to communicate what they see versus what I share and ask the students to tell me in the graphic organizer. As we finish each story, the students and I will reflect on the story and how race and colorblindness are seen in each story. We will talk about how reading one story from an area does not mean that is the only perspective on the race or culture. After we finish all these books, we will examine how each story is different and the same. We will also discuss how major differences we might see are because of the setting. These stories will prepare the students to be able to read additional books and see how the books influence the reader.

The students and I will read other stories such as *Li'l Dan, The Drummer Boy: A Civil War Story* by Romare Bearden, *Fry Bread* by Kevin Noble Maillard. The students will use these books to see how the differences of these stories show students a different perspective on topics that we have read or will continue to read about. The books will be to not only expose students to other perspectives but also to learn that one viewpoint is not the only available from that race or culture. The students will use their visual journal to express how the book makes them feel, what they might notice about the stories, or how this book speaks to the student.

Resources

Student Resources

Artell, Mike. 2001. *Petite Rouge: A Cajun Red Riding Hood*. Penguin Books.

This is one of the read aloud for the students to compare.

Bearden, Romare. 2003. *Li'l Dan, The Drummer Boy: A Civil War Story*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

This is one of the read aloud for the students to be exposed to additional perspectives.

Daly, Niki. 2006. *Pretty Selma: A Little Red Riding Hood Story from Africa*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

This is one of the read aloud for the students to compare.

Harvey, Jeanne. 2011. *My Hands Sing the Blues: Romare Bearden's Childhood Journey*. Two Lions.

This is one of the read aloud for the students to be exposed to additional types of books.

Kosteki-Shaw, Jenny Sue. 2011. *Same, Same but Different*. Henry Holt and Company.

This is a book to allow the students to start a discussion about race and colorblindness.

Maillard, Kevin Noble. 2019. *Fry Bread*. Roaring Brook Press.

This is one of the read aloud for the students to be exposed to additional perspectives.

Marshall, James. 1987. *Red Riding Hood*. Puffin Books.

This is one of the read aloud for the students to compare.

Young, Ed. 1989. *Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood Story from China*. Philomel Books.

This is one of the read aloud for the students to compare.

Teacher Resources

Blake, Felice. "Why Black Lives Matter in the Humanities." In *Seeing Race Again*, edited by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz, 307-26. University of California Press, 2019.

This Article is a good resource to regarding the importance of the black lives matter in humanities.

Boggs, Grace Lee, Scott Kurashige, Danny Glover, and Immanuel Wallerstein. *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*. Berkeley, UNITED STATES: University of California Press, 2012. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yale-ebooks/detail.action?docID=919284>.

In this book, the chapter entitled A Paradigm Shift in Our Concept of Education gives information about different types of schools and how to change out we educate our students.

Brown, Keffrelyn D., and Anthony L. Brown. "Teaching K-8 Students about Race: African Americans, Racism, and the Struggle for Social Justice in the U.S." *Multicultural Education* 19, no. 1 (2011): 9-13.

This book is a prime source for use when looking for ways to change how we see race.

Castro-Atwater, Sheri A. "Color-Blind Racial Ideology in K-12 Schools." In *The Myth of Racial Color Blindness: Manifestations, Dynamics, and Impact*, 207-25. Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14754-013>.

This article is an insightful discussion of the threat of color-blind ideology on students.

Husband, Terry. *But I Don't See Color: The Perils, Practices, and Possibilities of Antiracist Education*. Sense Publishers, 2016.

This book is a great resource to use when looking for background information while teaching this unit.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.K.3

With prompting and support, describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.

Students will be comparing and analyzing the stories that we are reading. They will be asked to be able to share what they find to the class. We will spend a lot of time analyzing different stories in a search for commonalities and ways they can link the stories to their own lives.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.K.8

With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.

Throughout the unit, students will be asked to answer questions about each book we read as well as sharing their own experiences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.1

Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about kindergarten topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups

The students will work together in oral conversations regarding the books as well as the conversation of community.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.3

Ask and answer questions in order to seek help, get information, or clarify something that is not understood.

Throughout the entire unit, the students will be asking and answer questions about what they have read, it's importance, and how it impacts them.

Endnotes

¹ Castro-Atwater, “Color-Blind Racial Ideology in K-12 Schools.”

² Blake, “Why Black Lives Matter in the Humanities.”

³ Blake.

⁴ Boggs et al., *The Next American Revolution*.

⁵ Husband, *But I Don't See Color*.

⁶ Brown and Brown, “Teaching K-8 Students about Race.”

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