

Read Aloud as an Anti-Bigotry Tool

by Kristin Beers

By kindergarten, children have already started to see themselves as either insiders or outsiders of certain groups. These groups may be based on gender, physical appearance, socioeconomic status, geographic location, race, religion, language, and so on. We have all seen young children dividing the world into “us versus them,” favoring one group over another. The “No Girls Allowed” or “No Boys Allowed” clubs become popular during recess and choice time.

What can we do when we see social issues beginning to influence children’s behavior and identities in the classroom? One of the best tools to address those early seeds of bigotry in the classroom is read aloud, something that many of us already do daily.

Read aloud paired with whole-class conversation allows us to bring certain relationships and issues to the surface, and at the same time teach critical literacy practices. Noticing and talking about social issues and behaviors in books supports students’ critical examination of these issues in their lives as well.

How to Use Read Aloud to Combat Bigotry, in 5 Steps

Step 1: *Pick a book that includes a social issue that your students are dealing with.* Look for books with accessible characters, strong storylines, and diverse cultures. For example, I chose *Horace and Morris but Mostly Dolores* by James Howe because it addresses the issue of children excluding those of the opposite gender, an issue that the children in my class were currently dealing with. I noticed that they had formed a “girls” table and a “boys” table in the cafeteria, and they were beginning to use language to categorize. I was hearing comments like, that’s a “girl thing” or a “boy thing” when referring to activities, colors, clothes, and toys.

Step 2: *Make sure that you are comfortable with the book and talking with your class about the issues in the book.* I’m a fan of James Howe. The characters in his book deal with the issue of difference and gender identity in a way that my students could access. The clear message and illustrations lend themselves nicely to growing conversations in the classroom. It is easier to have the students talk about Horace, Morris, and Dolores’ behaviors rather than pointing out behaviors that classmates were exhibiting.

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Step 3: *Preread the book and pick stopping points.* To support children’s ability to construct deeper meaning through thinking and talking about a book, many teachers thoughtfully preplan the places where they would like to plant idea seeds to help fuel a conversation. Through modeling thinking aloud, teachers encourage students to wonder, question, or think about the text. Stopping to encourage higher-level thinking can serve as tools to scaffold children’s thinking and build purposeful conversations.

Social Issue to Address	Pages to Stop	Questions to Ask
<i>Clubs, gender roles</i>	<p><i>Page 9: This is where Horace and Morris exclude Dolores.</i></p> <p><i>“A boy mouse must do what a boy mouse must do.”</i></p>	<p><i>What is happening here?</i></p> <p><i>Why are they leaving Dolores out?</i></p>

Step 4: *Read the book aloud, stopping to have the children consider the characters’ feelings, wonder, or notice the problem or issues.*

For example, after reading the lines;

“A boy mouse must do what a boy mouse must do. ‘What kind of place doesn’t allow girls?’ Dolores wondered as she watched her friends step through the door of the Mega-Mice clubhouse.”

I paused and asked my students, “What is happening here?”

Lily spoke up and said, “I think that Dolores feels sad.”

“Say more about that,” I said.

“Well maybe Dolores feels sad because she can’t play with her friends because she is a girl and girls aren’t allowed,” Lily added.

Max spoke up, “I agree with Lily that Dolores feels left out.”

Wanting everyone to have a chance to participate, I said, “Give a thumbs-up if you agree with Lily’s idea that Dolores feels left out.”

To encourage multiple points of view, I asked, “Does anyone think something different?”

Step 5: *Engage the whole class in a conversation addressing the issue.* Reread the book and have children practice retelling the major events before beginning the conversation. Many teachers find that it is easier to engage students in talk after the second reading of the book. This step may be done the next day or at a different time of the day. While it’s challenging, most teachers who are successful with this

work try not to lay values on their students by saying “we should think this way” or “I don’t want to see kids in this classroom forming clubs that leave people out.”

Paolo Freire, a pioneer of critical literacy practices, reminds us that teachers should meet children where they are and recognize that their comments reveal what the children know. We show respect for *their* knowledge by not assuming the position of *all knowing holder of knowledge*.

Many teachers begin by reminding students that during conversation there will be times where we wonder about something, times where we may have questions about the characters’ actions, and times where we may see something differently than our classmates. It is important to point out to students that there may even be times where we begin to think something different than we did before. These conversations offer a chance to challenge or reconsider what we think we believe and offer multiple points of view.

After reading the last line of *Horace and Morris but Mostly Dolores* by James Howe;

“*And the next day they built a clubhouse of their own. The Frisky Whisker Club— Everyone Allowed.*”

I asked, “Hmmm, What just happened?”

Grace spoke up and said, “Maybe they wanted to make a club where everyone can go, kind of like Martin Luther King.”

Jacob added, “Yeah like when Black and White people were apart. In this book they wanted boys and girls to be apart. That’s just not right for life.”

Given the opportunity to have a conversation allowed the students to make connections between their own “us versus them” behaviors with gender clubs, and the segregated south. Grace concluded that forming a club that included everyone was just like what Martin Luther King did: a conclusion that I never thought a kindergartener would have drawn.

Following are several questions and prompts that my colleagues and I use to guide whole-class conversations around social issues found in literature.

Higher level questions to start the grand conversation

- What is the problem in the story?
- Why do you think the author wrote this story?
- What do you notice about _____?
- Why do you think _____(character)_____ did that?

- Who has the power? Who is being left out?

Questions and prompts to guide the conversation

- How do you think _____ became this way?
- Did someone else think of it differently?
- Did the character’s feelings change? How?
- You said _____. Say more about that.
- Why is it like this?
- After reading this part I’m wondering _____.
- Could it be different?
- Did anyone’s thinking change?

Many teachers find it helpful to directly lead children to apply this to their own lives by pointing out that things that are happening in this story are happening around us. After reading, teachers can ask open-ended questions that will help guide the children to connect the literature to their own lives.

Questions to ask to connect the literature to students’ lives

- How does what is happening during recess connect with what is happening in this story?
- Did you ever feel this way?
- You said _____. Say more about that.
- What do you think the author wanted us to learn from this story?
- What will you do with this new thinking?
- Will you think or act differently?
- How can you share your new thinking?

You might end the conversation by linking it to future inquiry. You could say, “Wow. That was a great story. Each day we are going to read a book or revisit a book to help develop more ideas about friendship and accepting differences.”

When permitted to unfold, classroom conversations reveal insights into what stereotypical representations may need to be challenged or reconstructed through curricular/inquiry work, and the kinds of curricular engagements that can address assumptions and beliefs in the classroom. Teaching through dialogue affords students with opportunities to actively generate knowledge, ideas, and opinions without relying on instructional practices where the teacher is always depositing the

knowledge. The goal in facilitating class conversations is that eventually the teacher's voice will get quieter and the students' voices will become louder as they begin to naturally guide the conversations and generate conclusions on their own.

You may decide to build a repertoire of books around social issues to add to your toolbox as you go. Here are a few to get you started.

Friendship

Enemy Pie by Derek Munson
The Recess Queen by Alexis O'Neill
My New Friend is So Much Fun by Mo Willems
How to Lose All Your Friends by Nancy Carlson
One by Katherine Otoshi
Each Kindness by Jacqueline Woodson
The Sandwich Swap by Queen Rania

Race

The Name Jar by Yangsook Choi
The Colors of Us by Karen Katz
The Skin You Live In by Michael Tyler
Let's Talk About Race Julius Lester
Whoever You Are by Mem Fox
Skin Again by bell hooks

Gender

William's Doll by Charlotte Zolotow
Not All Princesses Dress in Pink by Jane Yolen
The Story of Ferdinand by Munro Leaf
Goblinheart by Brett Axe
The Sissy Duckling by H. Fierstein
Grace for President by Kelly DiPucchio
Jacob's New Dress by Sarah Hoffman
10,000 Dresses by Marcus Ewert
Ballerino Nate by Kimberley Brubaker

Class

A Chance to Shine by Steve Seskin
Fly Away Home by Eve Buntin
A Chair for My Mother by Vera Williams
Something Beautiful by Sharon Dennis Wyeth
Tight Times by Barbar Shook Hazen and Trina Schart Hyman
An Angel for Solomon Singer by Cynthia Rylant

A Day's Work by Eve Bunting
Those Shoes by Maribeth Boelts



Kristin Beers has been a primary grade teacher for the past 12 years, teaching in both rural and inner city areas of NYS. She is currently teaching at Public School 29 in Brooklyn, NY and is a graduate of the Literacy Specialist Program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Kristin is a recipient of the American Education Research Association (AERA) Teacher as Researcher SIG award for her work on implementing difficult conversations and critical literacy practices in the primary classroom. She has presented her work at NCTE and AERA and has led professional development workshops in New York and South Africa. Kristin's passions continue to be centered around early literacy practices and creating a caring learning environment which fosters social responsiveness and critical thinking.