I Hear You: Teaching Social Justice in Interactive Read-Aloud

The authors share their responsive teaching to develop children’s exploratory talk during interactive read-aloud with books.

Twenty-six third graders sit on the rug next to their read-aloud partners, eagerly participating in the interactive read-aloud of *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation* (Tonatiuh, 2014). Ted sits facing them. He shows the book cover and asks if anyone has read this book before. They work hard to unpack the meaning of key words in the title (*separate, equal, desegregation*) and the historical context before delving into the story.

Interactive read-aloud is a daily 20-minute event in our classrooms. We value it because it provides holistic experiences with language; gives our students experiences with diverse genres, formats, and authors; and promotes dialogic discourse, reading-writing connections, and sociocultural literacy interactions (Sipe, 2008). During our read-alouds, the class gathers as a community, preferably in a comfortable, inviting area of the classroom. The teacher reads a high-quality book that will make students want to hear more and provides opportunities for dialogic discourse before, during, and after reading aloud so that everyone’s comprehension and engagement with the text is enriched (Lennox, 2013). The overall experience should be a highlight of each school day: nurturing, inclusive, and joyful.

Research shows that these types of read-alouds support children’s development of habits, skills, and dispositions for reading, writing, and vocabulary (Lennox, 2013; Sipe, 2008). However, in our climate of standardization, interactive read-aloud is often crowded out of the curriculum for more skill-directed work, following the view that literacy reflects only the acquisition of discrete skill sets (Allington, 2011; Handsfield & Jimenez, 2009).

We are a teacher educator and two classroom teachers who work together in an urban public early childhood school for grades pre-K through 3. Our school serves a predominantly immigrant population with low socioeconomic status (67 percent free or reduced-price lunch) from the local neighborhood. Chinese immigrants make up 78 percent of the families, and 55 percent of the students are emergent English speakers. Mandarin is the predominant language in the home. Since the fall of 2015, Ted has averaged 20 days each school year working with professional staff to plan, implement, and reflect on literacy practices and units of study, including demonstrating and coaching instruction in classrooms. Meredith is a third grade general education teacher, and Meaghan is a lead teacher in a self-contained class of second- and third grade children with special needs.

While we have valued interactive read-aloud for years, we have become increasingly committed to read-alouds that address issues of social justice. By social justice, we mean topics that take on issues of equity (Boutte & Muller, 2018; Freire, 1970). We want our students to realize unfair conditions in the world, what’s unfair about them, who
Interactive Read-Aloud and Response for Social Justice

Interactive read-aloud has enormous value for children’s literacy development (Lennox, 2013; Sipe, 2008). If conducted consistently, this practice develops children’s book selection, oral language, vocabulary, content knowledge, and inferential thinking. Children develop a sense of genre (including narrative and expository text structures), archetypes, and the craft of authors and illustrators. They develop foundational skills, such as concepts of print, within meaningful contexts.

Teachers model how to use language during interactive read-aloud. Lennox (2013) points out the shift in power dynamics in dialogic discourse, when teachers genuinely share authority with children, promoting reciprocal, conversational exchanges that generate new perspectives, active listening, and collaborative thinking with the text. Children learn to apply these ways of thinking as they read independently (Sipe, 2008). Therefore, how interactive read-aloud occurs matters for children’s learning opportunities and language use.

Several educational researchers emphasize the deliberate planning teachers need for interactive read-aloud (Barrentine, 1996; Lennox, 2013). For example, Barrentine (1996) delineates seven steps for planning once a teacher chooses a high-quality, engaging book, including setting reading goals for students, building their background knowledge, and thinking about how to frame questions and prompts and the kinds of interactions to have. Sipe (2008) cautions against overplanning, however. His research on children’s construction of understanding during interactive read-aloud reveals a playful, “carnivalesque” atmosphere, so he advises teachers to be in the moment and invite children’s lived-through interpretations to arise (p. 229). Similarly, Barrentine advises to always be prepared to relinquish your plans in response to your students’ interactions (p. 42).

Researchers advise planning collaboratively and connecting reading goals to curriculum standards (Boutte & Muller, 2018; Cunningham & Enriquez, 2013). According to Beck and McKeown (2002), teachers should plan to review vocabulary,
particularly Tier 2 words, before, during, and after the read-aloud. Beck and McKeown also suggest refraining from always first showing illustrations, as they might hinder students’ envisioning from the spoken words alone. Other researchers (e.g., Cunningham & Enriquez, 2013; Sipe, 2008) emphasize the value of studying illustrations and peritext for children’s comprehension.

Beck and McKeown (2002) further recommend follow-up questions that cause children to elaborate and develop their initial thinking. Similarly, Hoffman (2011) shows the co-construction of knowledge between teachers and students when teachers ask follow-up questions that break the typical initiate, respond, evaluate (IRE) pattern of classroom discourse. Hoffman shows the skillful work the teacher in her study did in her follow-up questions to keep children to one focus, building toward collaborative interpretation. Pantaleo (2007) presents how she developed interthinking by valuing cognitive and social functions of collaborative discussion with first-grade students: “[T]he students’ language and behaviors mutually affected each other and the group as a whole, and the group affected the individual; individual and collective identities were constantly changing, adapting and emerging” (p. 445). May, Bingham, and Pendergast (2014) emphasize teachers’ cultural competence when they are responsive in ways that value, integrate, and build on students’ contributions in discussion. Culturally competent teachers assume that each child’s attempts in discussion are contributions to the collective understanding of the text. These skillful interchanges are especially important when exploring social justice books with children that present conceptually challenging themes and topics (Laman & Henderson, 2018).

Many researchers explore ideas for guiding children’s responses to social justice books. For example, Boutte and Muller (2018) assert that “the importance of engaging children in informed and action-oriented activities and discussions is essential if we wish to interrupt oppression and avoid reproducing . . . systems of inequity” (p. 3). Kesler (2018) presents myriad responses that value art and design, along with written responses, within collaborative learning communities. Some suggested responses include: sketch-to-stretch (Short & Harste, 1996), writing from multiple perspectives, and using visual displays such as a Venn diagram or a timeline to make sense of events in a text, and reformulations (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). In reformulations, students reformulate information into a format that was not presented in the text. For example, in Baseball Saved Us (Mochizuki, 1993), a Japanese American boy tells the story of how he and other children took up baseball to reclaim some dignity while their families were forced by the US government to live in an internment camp during World War II. Kesler (2018) reveals how some students explored the resourcefulness of these families by creating a chart showing materials and how they might have been used to make all the baseball equipment.

Drama activities, especially, open up an imaginative world for children and enable social construction of meaning for collective interpretation of a text (Adomat, 2010). Such activities engage children’s funds of knowledge through “collaborative use of mediational means to create, obtain, and communicate meaning” (Moll, Velez-Ibanez, & Rivera, 1990, p. 13).

**Social Justice in Dialogic Classroom Communities**

We believe that explorations of social justice issues provide powerful ways to develop our students’ literacy. According to Freire (2005), reading is a “creative experience around comprehension, comprehension and communication” (p. 35). Thus, “[r]eading of the word enables us to read a previous reading of the world” (p. 34). Freire had a holistic vision of the reading process that melded theory and practice, allowing for the acquisition of skills through the act of reading. For Freire, “reading . . . the word” and “reading . . . the world” exist in a dialectic: a cyclical tension. In other words, Freire expected readers to actively bring their reading of the world to the reading of the word, and then to read the word so that it transforms the way they view the world.

To generate awareness of and work toward social progress, pedagogy must be inherently dialogic. As Freire (1970) asserts, “I cannot think for others or without others, nor can others think for
“me” (p. 108; italic in original). Dialogic curriculum is generative and requires a genuine encounter between people mediated by social concerns about the world. The power balance between teacher and students becomes more distributed. Dialogic discourse enables what Hoffman (2011) describes as the “co-construction of meaning” and what Pantaleo (2007) describes as “interthinking” or thinking collectively. Collective thinking involves exploratory talk that is speculative and perhaps inconclusive. Mercer (1995) explains that exploratory talk involves individuals engaging “critically but constructively with each other’s ideas. . . . Challenges are justified and alternative hypotheses are offered” (p. 104). Interactive read-aloud gives children opportunities to talk about topics of social justice with the teacher’s guidance, learning by and through talking. These principles informed and guided the practices that we intended to implement with our students.

Choosing High-Quality Children’s Books

To find high-quality books, we begin with recommendations on trusted websites that review children’s literature with an emphasis on social justice. One helpful guide is “Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children’s Books” (Derman-Sparks, n.d.). We consider both books that fit our community and books that represent the diversity of our society. Figure 1 shows an annotated list of a few websites that have guided our selections. We also rely on established award sites such as Orbis Pictus, Robert Sibert, the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award, and “Best Books of the Year” lists from Bank Street College or organizations such as the National Council for the Social Studies. Focusing on awards lists helps us to quickly identify children’s books that are accessible, well-received, and already recognized for their excellence (Yokota, 2011).

Planning for Interactive Read-Aloud of Separate Is Never Equal

Duncan Tonatiuh’s book Separate Is Never Equal tells the true story of Sylvia Mendez and her family’s fight for desegregation in the public schools of Westminster, California. In 1947, when Sylvia was entering sixth grade, the lawsuit that her family organized helped to end segregation in California schools seven years before the landmark Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education. (We are well-aware, however, that we now teach in one of the most segregated public school systems in the country; see, for example, http://bit.ly/schoolsegregationny.)

Figure 1. Five websites for high-quality social justice children’s books.

https://socialjusticebooks.org/

From the website: “This site offers carefully selected lists of books for children and educators, book reviews, and articles on social justice, and multicultural children’s literature.”

http://www.janeaddamschildrensbookaward.org

From the website: The Jane Addams Children’s Book Award “annually recognizes children’s books of literary and aesthetic excellence that effectively engage children in thinking about peace, social justice, global community, and equity for all people.”

https://wowlit.org

From the website: “Worlds of Words is committed to creating an international network of people who share the vision of bringing books and children together, thereby opening windows on the world.” They provide annotated booklists and resources by languages and geographical regions.

https://diversebooks.org/ (Twitter: #weneeddiversebooks)

From the website: “We Need Diverse Books is a non-profit and a grassroots organization of children’s book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people.”

The Anti-Defamation League. From the website: “Books have the potential to create lasting impressions. They have the power to instill empathy, affirm children’s sense of self, teach about others, transport to new places and inspire actions on behalf of social justice.”
To prepare for each interactive read-aloud, we designed a planning template (Figure 2) that reminds us to plan with our students in mind. We begin with discussing our purposes: why we chose this book, whom we plan to conduct the interactive read-aloud with, and when. We consider how it connects to our curriculum and discuss how many days might be needed, assuming 20 minutes of interactive read-aloud daily. After reading and discussing *Separate Is Never Equal* (Tonatiuh, 2014), we wanted our second- and third grade students to understand what *desegregation* means, and the gross inequity Sylvia and her brothers endured; the sacrifices the Mendez family and other community members made in their fight for justice; and the idea that “when you fight for justice, others will follow”

![Figure 2. Planning template for interactive read-aloud.](image)

### ENGAGEMENT WITH AN INTERACTIVE READ-ALOUD PICTURE BOOK

**Book Title, Author/Illustrator:** ___________________________________________________________________

**Once you have chosen a wonderful picture book to use:**

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<tr>
<th>Why/how did you choose this book?</th>
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<th>Who are you planning to read it to?</th>
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<th>What key understandings does this text support and develop?</th>
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### KEY VOCABULARY (including academic and literary language concepts):

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<th>Before reading:</th>
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<tr>
<th>During reading: (include p. #s or, if unpaged, openings)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POINT IN TEXT</td>
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<th>After reading:</th>
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<tr>
<th>Other considerations. For example, will you read this book across more than one sitting? Will you re-read this book? For what purposes? How might this book connect with your curriculum?</th>
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### Possible Extension Activities:

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<th>ACTIVITY</th>
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Our notes (see Figure 3) show how to derive understandings directly from key quotes in the book. We select words and phrases for vocabulary that carry the meaning of the social justice themes we want to explore.

Our plans for before, during, and after the read-aloud stem from key understandings we want to develop. We consider what background knowledge our students will need to read the world prior to reading the word. For Separate Is Never Equal, for example, our students would first need to understand the concept of desegregation. They would also need to know that this history takes place in 1947 California. To support making connections, we also wanted students to consider all the conditions in our school that make it a wonderful place to learn.

**Figure 3.** Planning template for Separate Is Never Equal.

**ENGAGEMENT WITH AN INTERACTIVE READ-ALOUD PICTURE BOOK**

**Book Title, Author/Illustrator:** Separate Is Never Equal, by Duncan Tonatiuh

**Once you have chosen a wonderful picture book to use:**

**Why/how did you choose this book?**

It teaches important history lessons about desegregation. It is written and illustrated by a Mexican author. It shows the importance of fighting for our rights.

**Who are you planning to read it to?**

2nd and 3rd grade students—whole class read-aloud

**What key understandings does this text support and develop?**

Compare and contrast. Double bubble map of the White v. Mexican schools (pp. 3, 7, 15)

Synthesis: all the ways that people had to advocate for their rights.

Collaboration: the ideas on page 33—“when you fight for justice others will follow”

Important life lessons: see quote on p. 29. “‘Segregation tends to give an aura of inferiority. In order to have the people of the United States understand one another it is necessary for them to live together, and the public school is the one mechanism where all the children of all the people go,’ said one of them.”

**KEY VOCABULARY** (including academic and literary language concepts):

justice, injustice, segregation, desegregation, separate, inclusion, exclusion, racism, advocacy, inferior, superior

**Planning for:**

**Before reading:**

“How would you describe our school?”

Post the word DESEGREGATION. Whole class discussion.

Connect to the title: Separate Is Never Equal. Sylvia Mendez and Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation.

“We mostly think about African Americans when we think of segregation. In this book, Separate Is Never Equal, we’re going to learn about Mexican Americans.”

Setting: California, 1947.

**During reading:**

**DAY 1:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POINT IN TEXT</th>
<th>STRUCTURE</th>
<th>Skill and Possible Prompt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title page</td>
<td>Whole class discussion</td>
<td>Why would Duncan Tonatiuh place these children inside the American flag? What do you think he wants us to know about them? (Infering)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After p. 3</td>
<td>Think aloud</td>
<td>“Don’t you know that’s why we fought?” I wonder what that means. Let’s find out. (Monitoring for sense; Asking questions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After p. 11</td>
<td>Whole class discussion</td>
<td>Why would Aunt Soledad make this decision? (Infering)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full page spread, pp. 14–15</td>
<td>Turn and Talk</td>
<td>What was terrible about this school? (Evaluating)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
### DAY 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POINT IN TEXT</th>
<th>STRUCTURE</th>
<th>Skill and Possible Prompt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After p. 17</td>
<td>Whole class discussion</td>
<td>How is Mr. Mendez trying to fight for fair treatment? (Synthesis) Why were some people scared to join the fight? (Cause and effect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full page spread, pp. 18–19</td>
<td>Turn and Talk</td>
<td>Study the illustration: what does this illustration show us? (Inferring; then, compare to back cover.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After p. 21</td>
<td>Whole class discussion</td>
<td>In what ways were BOTH Mendez parents fighting for fair rules? (Inferring; Synthesis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After p. 27</td>
<td>Whole class discussion</td>
<td>What were Mr. Kent's reasons for keeping the schools segregated? (Synthesis) The author tells us this was <em>degrading</em>. (Give them definition of <em>degrading</em>.) How were Mr. Kent's reasons degrading to Sylvia, the other children, and their families? (Cause and effect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After p. 29</td>
<td>Write quote on whiteboard. Whole class discussion</td>
<td>What does this quote mean? (Monitoring for sense) Do you agree or disagree? Why? (Evaluating)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After p. 33</td>
<td>Write quote on whiteboard. Whole class discussion</td>
<td>“But her mother said, ‘Cuando la causa es justa, los demás te siguen.’ ‘When you fight for justice, others will follow.’” What does this mean? How did this happen in this story? (Monitoring for sense; Synthesis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before p. 34</td>
<td>Think Aloud</td>
<td>Back to 1947, and sixth grade. (Monitoring for sense)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### After reading:
**DAY 3:**

Read the Author's Note at end of book to discuss history of segregation in public schools in the United States. Then, discuss:

*Important life lessons: see quote on p. 29 of the book. “‘Segregation tends to give an aura of inferiority. In order to have the people of the United States understand one another it is necessary for them to live together, and the public school is the one mechanism where all the children of all the people go,’ said one of them.”*

Small group discussion, then write response.

**Other considerations?**

For formative assessment: kidwatching and note taking. Videorecord: if time, students can watch and reflect on their dramatic responses.

Possible curriculum connections: research and timeline of history of fight for desegregation in United States public schools.

### Possible Extension Activities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>RATIONALE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared writing of script of the trial, then readers theater. Subtext Strategy for full page spread on pp. 14–15.</td>
<td>Excellent shared writing activity; introduces students to new genre—script writing; encourages collaboration; provides fluency practice; builds students’ comprehension of the pivotal event in the book; gives opportunity to evaluate their performances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtext Strategy for full page spread on pp. 14–15.</td>
<td>Opportunity to embody these characters and realize their conditions from their perspective. Will raise students’ awareness of unfairness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot seat - interview characters as a reporter.</td>
<td>Opportunity to role play and speak from multiple perspectives about the unfairness of the conditions in the book.</td>
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</table>
Next, we use sticky notes to mark places in the book that we might want to discuss with students. For example, for Figure 4, our sticky note was: “T & T: What was terrible about this school?” Figure 5 lists a few structural strategies we use for interactive read-aloud with the whole class. For example, in Separate Is Never Equal, we wanted whole class discussion after Aunt Soledad made the decision not to enroll any of the children in the Whites-only public school. Sometimes we put students into small groups to discuss a provocative question or theme, especially prior to an extension activity. The small group structure also provides opportunities for more children to participate than does whole class discussion.

We also consider the fact that the kinds of prompts we use push students toward particular ways of thinking. For example, if we prompt students to ask, “What do you think Mr. Mendez will do after he finds out about not being allowed to enroll his children in the local neighborhood

Figure 4. Full-page spread from Separate Is Never Equal.

Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation Copyright © 2014 by Duncan Tonatiuh. Image reproduced with permission of the publisher, Abrams Books for Young Readers, an imprint of ABRAMS, New York, NY.

Figure 5. Interactive read-aloud structural strategies.

Think Aloud: Share your own thoughts with the students about what you just read.

Think, Pair, Share: After giving a prompt, students first think silently, then pair to discuss their thinking, then share insights whole class.

Turn and Talk: After giving a prompt, students turn and talk with their read-aloud partner to discuss their thinking.

Stop and Think: Students might stop and envision a scene or embody character emotions or actions, in response to your prompts.

Stop and Jot: After giving a prompt, students do a quick write of their thinking in their reader response notebooks. This also provides a good source of formative assessment.

Whole-class discussion: After giving a prompt, students discuss their thinking whole class. If possible, it’s best if students slide into a circle on the perimeter of the meeting area so they can all see each other, which supports active speaking and listening.

Small-group discussion: After giving a prompt, you might put students into small groups to discuss their thinking.
school?” we are pushing them to predict. If we ask, “What was terrible about the Mexican school?” we are pushing them to synthesize information. If we ask, “What does this mean?” after two education specialists during the final day of the hearing explain why school segregation is harmful, we are pushing students to explain.

After reading, a whole class discussion takes place that explores key thematic ideas in the book. Figure 3 shows our plans for whole class discussion and other possible explorations after reading *Separate Is Never Equal*. We wanted to return to the argument made by the education specialists in the hearing about the harmfulness of segregated schools, and what was possible for Sylvia and her siblings now that they won the fight to attend a desegregated school. Other extension activities depend on how the book fits with other curriculum work and how much time we can give to particular explorations. We have to have a strong rationale to include an extension activity in our plans, using guiding questions such as “Does the activity deepen children’s understanding of the text?” “Does it introduce new ways of thinking?” and “Does it connect with other curriculum work?” For example, we thought of doing a shared writing of a readers theater script of the hearing, then putting students in small groups to practice and perform it. This activity would provide an authentic purpose for shared writing, introduce our students to a new genre (script writing), encourage collaboration, provide fluency practice, build students’ comprehension of the pivotal event in the book, and give students an opportunity to evaluate their performances. These are strong reasons to implement this purposeful extension activity.

We also imagine multimodal responses by thinking of purposeful ways to use drama, art, or music (Rowe, 1998; Sipe, 2008), or creative written responses (Kesler, 2018). These diverse responses provide many supportive ways for Meaghan’s special need students to explore and express their understandings (Adomat, 2010). For example, for *Separate Is Never Equal*, we thought of the subtext strategy to help our students imagine the terrible conditions the children faced at the Mexican school (Clyde, 2003). In the subtext strategy, children make a tableau of a key scene in the story. Using a pointer as a “magic wand,” the teacher or another student taps one of the children, who then shares thoughts and feelings in the voice of the character until the tapper says “Stop.” We also thought of the hot seat to infer the perspectives of Sylvia and Mr. and Mrs. Mendez during their fight for desegregation (Adomat, 2012). In this dramatization, children, acting in character, are interviewed about their actions and behaviors in the story by classmates, who may be taking on the role of reporter, talk show host, or something else.

**Implementing Interactive Read-Aloud**

We now present an interactive read-aloud for social justice in action in Meredith’s third grade class (conducted by Ted) and reader response work by Meredith and Meaghan with our students. We video-recorded all these sessions for our analysis. We then viewed and discussed these recordings for salient moments before, during, and after reading, highlighting ways students and the teacher co-constructed dialogic discourse for the dialectic of reading the word and reading the world. We examined the language closely to account for both teachers’ talk with students and students’ talk with each other in paired and group activities (Mercer, 2004).

(In the following excerpts, when one of us is teaching, we use third-person singular and plural; when thinking collectively, we use first-person plural.)

**Before Reading**

We now return to the opening vignette. After asking if anyone has read the book, Ted points out the author and illustrator’s name and the award stickers. He then reads the book title.

Ted: Everyone say *desegregation*.

ALL: Desegregation.

The students repeat the word a few times and clap out the syllables. They determine that the word must be big because it has five syllables. Ted writes the word on the whiteboard using a different color for each word part. They unpack its meaning by looking at the root word, the prefix, and the suffix and how they connect to the words *separate* and *equal* in the title. Ted uses consistent gestures to
show separate and its opposite, together. He then writes 1947 on the whiteboard and says, “Take a minute with your partner to talk about how many years ago that was.” After 45 seconds, Ted calls the students back to attention. They are used to raising “a quiet thumb” to respond. They conclude that the events took place 71 years ago. Next, Ted informs them that Sylvia Mendez was ten years old in the story. “How old would she be now?” he asks. This matters because the class will later discuss the back matter of the book and might want to research Sylvia Mendez’s life. Ted then holds up a globe and points out New York, where the class is. He circles the United States with his index finger, then sweeps across to California, where this history takes place.

Ted opens to the title page. “Here is Sylvia Mendez and I think some of her friends and family, other children,” he says. “What do you notice about this picture?” Julie (all children’s names are pseudonyms) notices that Sylvia’s face is centered within the American flag. Other children point to the American flag in the corner of the classroom. “So, why would the artist, Duncan Tonatiuh, put these children inside the American flag?” Ted waits, then repeats the question with new phrasing and waits again. “Turn and tell your partner.” After 30 seconds, Ted asks “Who would like to share an idea?” Alfred:

Alfred: I think that maybe it resembles freedom.
Ted: How so? Why do you think so?
Alfred: [hesitates] Uhhh… [He smiles awkwardly.]
Ted: What did you say to your partner? [He waits 5 seconds.] Anyone else want to add or say more?
Jenny: I want to add to Alfred that I think it means freedom because, long time ago, like, Brown kids and White kids aren’t supposed to go to the same school. Brown kids have to use, like, a colorful fountain if they want to drink water, and White kids have to use, um, a White fou- , like… [her voice trails off]
Ted: So, separate. [He points to the title.] Right? [Jenny nods in affirmation.] Alright, good thinking.

This took 9 minutes and 30 seconds, but a great deal of reading the world was accomplished. Children developed their understanding of desegregation, connecting it to two other key words in the title, separate and equal, and to the United States. They established the historical time period and place. Both Alfred and Jenny practiced exploratory talk. Alfred showed hypothetical thinking with “I think” and “maybe.” Jenny added on constructively to Alfred’s thought, prefacing her ideas with “I think” and linking her claim to reasons with “because.” Several children expressed partial understandings, such as when Alfred hesitated or when Jenny mentioned “a colorful fountain” before trailing off. They implicitly realized that these brown-skinned children are American. Ted also used deliberate instructional moves to co-construct knowledge, such as practicing wait time and rephrasing questions, coupled with consistent use of gestures. He asked open-ended questions that invited exploratory talk, prompted for elaboration, and allowed uncertainties to linger. Ted also used visual tools for cognitive support, such as colored markers and the globe. He made sure all children participated through “turn and talk” and honored children’s contributions.

**During Reading**

Ted gave an expressive read-aloud that demonstrated prosody, an important dimension of reading fluency (Rasinski, 2014), by using gestures and modulating his voice to express the emotions of characters. For example, in the first opening, as Ted reads aloud “She was looking for her locker when a young White boy pointed at her and yelled, ‘Go back to the Mexican school! You don’t belong here’” (p. 2), he raises his voice and points like the boy in the illustration.

Reading with prosody will help students with developing comprehension (Rasinski, 2014). After reading page 3, Ted asks: “I’m wondering why Sylvia’s mother said, ‘Don’t you know that’s why we fought?’” [He waits five seconds.] “Like, she said, don’t give up. ‘Don’t you know that’s why we fought?’” I’m wondering [he points to his temple] why the mother is saying that. Let’s find out.” But Myra raises a quiet thumb. “You have an idea
already? Why do you think the mother said, ‘Don’t you know that’s why we fought?’”

**Myra:** Because the mother wanted her to go to, like, the White people’s school, so that’s why, um, she fought for her to go to the White people’s school.

**Ted:** Okay. Let’s see how that happens.

After reading “Three years earlier” on page 5 of the second opening, Ted asks the children to help establish what year that would be, draws an arrow down from 1947 to 1944, and emphasizes that “now we are going even further back in time.” After reading “leasing a farm,” Ted says, “that means he was renting a farm, he was going to pay rent for a farm.”

On the third opening, they learn that Sylvia was going to enter third grade. Ted points to 1944. “If that was 1944” [he flips back to the first opening] “and this was 1947, that means that here [the first opening] she was going into” [he holds up a finger for each year, and the children count up] “fourth, fifth, sixth, sixth grade.” After reading “they noticed that the hallways were spacious and clean,” Ted points out, “ kinda like our school, big hallways and spacious and clean.” On the fifth opening, at the end of page 11, he asks “Now, why would Aunt Sole-dad make that decision not to enroll any of them?” [He waits three seconds.] “She was allowed by the rules” [he flips back to the previous opening] “to enroll these two children” [he points to her two children] “but not the Mendez children” [he points them out], “and she said ‘I will not enroll any of them!’ and she left the office.” [Ted waits.]

**Ananya:** Maybe because it might not be fair if, like, only those two girls get to do it and it would make everyone else feel bad, like the boys, and only the girls get to go.

**Ted:** Okay, but Sylvia is a girl, and she was not allowed to go either.

**Ananya:** Maybe because they didn’t allow any of them to go because it wasn’t fair if the two girls got to go, but they didn’t.

**Myra:** I think, um, Sylvia and her two brothers didn’t get to go because, on the first page, I notice that it says, like on the first page, when you read, “and then a boy pointed at her,” and I noticed that everybody was White, so I predict that this is a White school, and they’re not wanting to let the Black in because the skin has to be black [shakes her head no], I mean White.

**Ted:** Okay, so darker skin children.

After reading the sixth opening, Ted says “before we stop, turn to your partner, and tell each other, what are you thinking now?” One pair of students had the following musings:

**Steven:** I’m thinking that maybe, if she’s in sixth grade, and she’s not allowed with the White kids in a White school, I wonder why, on the first page, why was she in the White school?

**Henry:** Yeah, I wonder that, too.

**Steven:** ’Cause the secretary didn’t give her a card. How come she’s in a White school now?

**Henry:** Yeah, she’s in a White school, but I don’t know why.

**Steven:** Wait. Maybe three years have passed and things have changed.

Ted’s explicit explanation of the jumps in time in the text seemed to scaffold this speculative talk between Henry and Steven, leading to Steven’s conclusion. After one minute, Ted signals for attention. “We’re almost out of time, but before we stop, who has, um, anyone have a thought that ‘I have to share this because it’s so important, I really need everybody to hear this’?”

**Alfred:** It’s unfair because, just because you have a dark skin color [and he has the same skin tone as Sylvia and her brothers] that doesn’t mean you can’t go to a school.

**Ted:** Yes, I hear you, I hear you.

**Ananya:** I also agree with Alfred [and she also has the same skin tone as Sylvia and her Brothers] because why should they go to a Mexican school. Um, like, like, this school is closer to our houses, right? And that school is closer to their houses. So, why can’t they go? It’s like the shortest distance they can find to
the school. [As she speaks, other children raise their quiet thumbs for turns to speak.]

Ted: Great. So, you made a really good text-to-self connection to help you understand the story. Good. Last comment. Yes?

Henry: I agree with Jasmine because, like, schools are the same, because they, they [three-second pause], because they teach the same things, and [three-second pause].

Ted: So, why do you agree with Jasmine? [five-second pause] Okay, do you want to think about it more? [Henry nods.] Okay, we have to stop [20 minutes are up]. We’ll pick up on this tomorrow.

Several exchanges show students’ exploratory talk. Children expressed speculation using words such as maybe, asking questions, taking a wondering stance, and backing claims with evidence using because. Several children had longer utterances because explicit reasoning requires the linking of clauses (Mercer, 1995). In dialogic discourse, exchanges show children building on one another’s ideas, with markers such as “I agree with” and seeking agreement by asking “right?” Their exploratory talk produced interthinking, understandings that were stronger and more nuanced than they would have achieved on their own, such as Ananya’s emphatic opinion about fairness before the close of our read-aloud session.

Ted was genuinely surprised when Myra shared her thoughts about “Don’t you know that is why we fought?” This occurred only because he provided the silence for thinking that Myra wanted to fill. Ted’s wait time with Henry is also instructive. We speculate that Henry raised a quiet thumb to speak because of his turn and talk discussion with Steven. Henry is an emergent bilingual, so Ted had to negotiate the tension between providing time for him to articulate his thoughts and the pressure of addressing the whole class. Ted then responded “Okay, do you want to think about it more?” and Henry agreed. It was reassuring to students that he would pick up on this tomorrow.

Ted supported emergent English speakers in other explicit ways, such as by demonstrating prosody, including gestures, pointing out details in the illustrations and using the illustrations as a resource for thinking, and providing vocabulary definitions in the flow of the read-aloud (Barrenetine, 1996). Ted often rephrased comments and questions, knowing that the children needed this language support as emergent English speakers. For example, he asked three different ways why Sylvia’s mother said “Don’t you know that’s why we fought?” before Myra surprised him with a response, and then he rephrased the question again. Ted also gave supportive feedback, such as pointing out Ananya’s text-to-self connection or, after Alfred shared how unfair the situation was to the Mendez children, honestly stating, “Yes, I hear you, I hear you.” Finally, Ted directed children toward warrantable responses (Rosenblatt, 1995) grounded in the inscribed codes of the author/illustrator, composing within the culturally accepted conventions of this particular genre. For example, he challenged Ananya’s first comment by pointing out, “Okay, but Sylvia is a girl, and she was not allowed to go either,” leading to a refinement of Ananya’s thinking.

After Reading

We now share two dramatizations we did with our students to further synthesize key themes in Separate Is Never Equal. One dramatization employed the subtext strategy (Clyde, 2003) to help our students realize the injustice of attending the Mexican school (see Figure 4). We paired students and invited them to take the exact body positions of the children in the illustration on the seventh opening (pp. 14–15). This is the page where the author depicts the horrible conditions of the Mexican school. When Meaghan tapped one of the children on the shoulder, the child spoke the thoughts of the character in the illustration until Meaghan said stop, then she tapped the other character to speak, back and forth, until the dialogue flowed between them for a few minutes. Here’s an excerpt between Saleema and Alejandro:

Alejandro: If we eat our food with flies on them, we might get sick.

Saleema: Yeah, we might get really, really sick, if you swallow a fly, so, I’d rather go to
the other school. But that’s how the principal is, and the culture is, so . . .

Alejandro: We have to try our best.

Saleema: We’ll try if we get an education, and learn a lot, like the White school.

Alejandro: I wish all the White kids weren’t so mean to me.

Saleema: Yeah, the principal there too. So, if they’re going to be mean, I’d rather just stay at this school. I really wanna go to the White school too, ’cause I’m half American, and all my family’s half American, we just come from, we’re different neighbors, right?

Above, the children embodied the characters in the illustration, pretending to hold and eat their sandwiches and brush away flies as they spoke. We also noticed how they built on each other’s ideas, synthesized the unfair situation the characters faced, and inferred characters’ thoughts and feelings beyond what was reported in the text (e.g., by mimicking getting sick in the dirty conditions they had at the Mexican school). Saleema also expressed ambivalence about attending the White school. While she dreaded attending school where everyone is mean, she also embraced desegregation: “we just come from, we’re different neighbors, right?” This strategy also provided formative assessment. For example, when Saleema said she (as Sylvia Mendez) was half American, she expressed confusion about the term Mexican American. Saleema is African American, and we then wondered if she also thought that makes her “half American.” We knew that this was a concept we wanted to revisit with the class.

Another dramatization we tried was “hot seat” (Adomat, 2012). In Meredith’s class, she had one child play the reporter, interviewing Sylvia and Mr. Mendez in the center of the rug as the class observed on the perimeter. Here are excerpts of one of these interviews:

Eric: Uh, why do you want to go to the White school?

Allison: Because they have bigger halls and cleaner halls. The school that I go to, it’s totally gross. No big, no clean halls, and they don’t have to eat outside, and there’s a huuuggge playground, and there’s better teachers, and it’s way cleaner there, and it’s not rusty, and there’s no cow poop.

[A few turns later, after the reporter asked Mr. Mendez his opinion]

Eric: Mr. Mendez, have you asked the president?

Meredith: I think what he’s asking is, are you going to continue to fight to get your children into the other school?

Simon: Well, I’m willing to fight, but at the same time, I’m pretty afraid because I feel like this is kinda illegal.

Meredith: Interesting thought. You think it’s illegal, but you’re still willing to fight for the right. Let’s talk more about that tomorrow.

Discussion

Interactive read-aloud provided a strong sociocultural context for our students’ interthinking (Pantaleo, 2007) toward a deeper understanding of complex social justice issues in books. We set up conditions for exploratory talk (Mercer, 1995) that enabled our class community to co-construct meaning (Hoffman, 2011). Teachers and students became “continually ready to rethink what has been thought and to revise their positions” (Freire, 2005, p. 32). Our students often used speculative thought, using
phrases like *maybe* or “I wonder,” asking questions, or making predictions to express their tenuous building of ideas. Dramatizations (Adomat, 2010, 2012; Clyde, 2002; Rowe, 1998; Sipe, 2008) and other creative responses (Kesler, 2018) provided opportunities to extend their understandings. Students were able to embody and infer the perspectives of characters in situations far beyond their own limited experiences, thereby realizing the complexity of advocacy toward social justice. Our students practiced the dialectic of reading the word in order to read the world (Freire, 2005), which we believe will propel their literacy development.

Central to this work was careful planning and implementation of each read-aloud session. We planned collaboratively and always with students in mind (Barrentine, 1996; Lennox, 2013). Plans were accommodating of our students’ language needs and specified the kind of “reading the world” knowledge our students might need before starting each read-aloud as well as ways to support dialogic discourse during read-alouds and activities to extend student understanding after reading. At the same time, we relied on Sipe’s (2008) conception of scaffolding as a synergy “where the teacher’s astute assistance may result in more active participation in literary interpretation on the part of the children,” so that interpretation becomes a *shared* responsibility between teachers and students (p. 200; italics in original). Synergy starts with planning, especially for books that address social justice issues. As Johnston (2012) notes, “Teaching is planned opportunism. We have an idea of what to teach children, and we plan ways to make that learning possible. When we put our plans into action, children offer us opportunities to say something, or not, and the choices we make affect what happens next” (p. 4).

Planned opportunism occurred in our responsive decisions during interactive read-alouds for dialogic discourse with sustained shared thinking episodes (Lennox, 2013). We enabled co-construction of thinking by considering when and how long to practice wait time, using meaningful gestures, providing definitions in the flow of reading, using illustrations deliberately to support comprehension (Beck & McKeown, 2002; Cunningham & Enríquez, 2013; Sipe, 2008), demonstrating prosody for reading comprehension (Rasinski, 2014), valuing respectful listening and building on each other’s ideas (May, Bingham, & Pendergast, 2014), asking open-ended questions and rephrasing to prompt more sophisticated thinking (Hoffman, 2011; Pantaleo, 2007), and emphasizing warrantable reading of the text (Rosenblatt, 1995). We were responsive to students’ participation, always assuming their intelligent contributions to our collaborative understandings (May, Bingham, & Pendergast, 2014). Consequently, we were prepared to relinquish our plans to pursue their interests and ideas (Barrentine, 1996). Students’ participation helped us to engage in formative assessment: We were attentive to partial understandings and confusions in their discourse, which informed us what ideas warranted more discussion and follow-up lessons.

Our work with social justice interactive read-alouds is risky because it confronts challenges our students face in their daily lives. We are striving to embed our interactive read-alouds within culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). For example, we recently completed an exploration in which we studied translanguaging in picturebooks and then invited our students to use translanguaging in their memoirs (Kesler, Reilly, & Eng-Tsang, 2019). Laman and Henderson (2018) also provide guiding questions that support such aspects of our work as inviting parents into our curriculum by asking them “What makes your child great?” (p. 25); leveraging our students’ social, cultural, and linguistic resources (such as through translanguaging in memoirs); supporting our students’ sense of agency and identity in our curriculum; and considering what current sociopolitical issues students are facing and making space in the curriculum to engage them meaningfully with these issues.

**Implications**

This article presents the opposite of scripted curriculum in the form of a process that demands us to develop expertise as well as to continually learn and study outstanding books for children with social justice themes. We remain responsive to the sociocultural context of our community and continue...
to hone our practice of supporting our students for dialogic discourse that leads to co-construction of meaning, and we feel fortunate to work in a school that supports these ways of working. Our administration provides and encourages common planning periods, allocates funds to the books we request, and supports the use of real literature with children.

Just as interthinking in interactive read-aloud depends on a class community (Pantaleo, 2007), our work as teachers depends on the school community. By sharing resources for great children’s literature, our planning template, and details of our deliberate process, we hope teachers in less supportive school communities will realize how to provide these rich literacy experiences for their own students. As Boutte and Muller (2018) assert, “silence on issues of discrimination is not an option. Silence makes us complicit” (p. 8). Standardization has driven instruction toward skills-based practice, especially for our most vulnerable students (Allington, 2011; Handsfield & Jimenez, 2009). We hope we have shown the far-ranging skills children can acquire when we engage them in the dialectic of reading the world as they read the word.

References


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**Children’s Literature Cited**

**Check out these ReadWriteThink.org resources for additional ideas:**
Teacher Read-Aloud That Models Reading for Deep Understanding
*This guide describes the basic elements for reading aloud to students in ways that demonstrate thoughtful and deep interactions with the text.*

Using Collaborative Reasoning to Support Critical Thinking
*Students will participate in Collaborative Reasoning in small groups to discuss and think critically about issues of social justice and diversity by reading current events informational articles.*

Literature as a Catalyst for Social Action: Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges
http://bit.ly/ZiuuRg

Students are invited to confront and discuss issues of injustice and intolerance in response to reading a variety of fiction and nonfiction texts.

Let's Talk about Stories: Shared Discussion
http://bit.ly/1PUXwxl
*Make space for critical literacy and engage students in meaningful, thoughtful discussions. Using a selected shared text, students dig deep into themes such as prejudice, courage, and self-confidence.*

Seeing Multiple Perspectives: An Introductory Critical Literacy Lesson
*Students consider the perspectives of characters, gaining much deeper understandings of the story and realizing that every story truly gives a partial account.*

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